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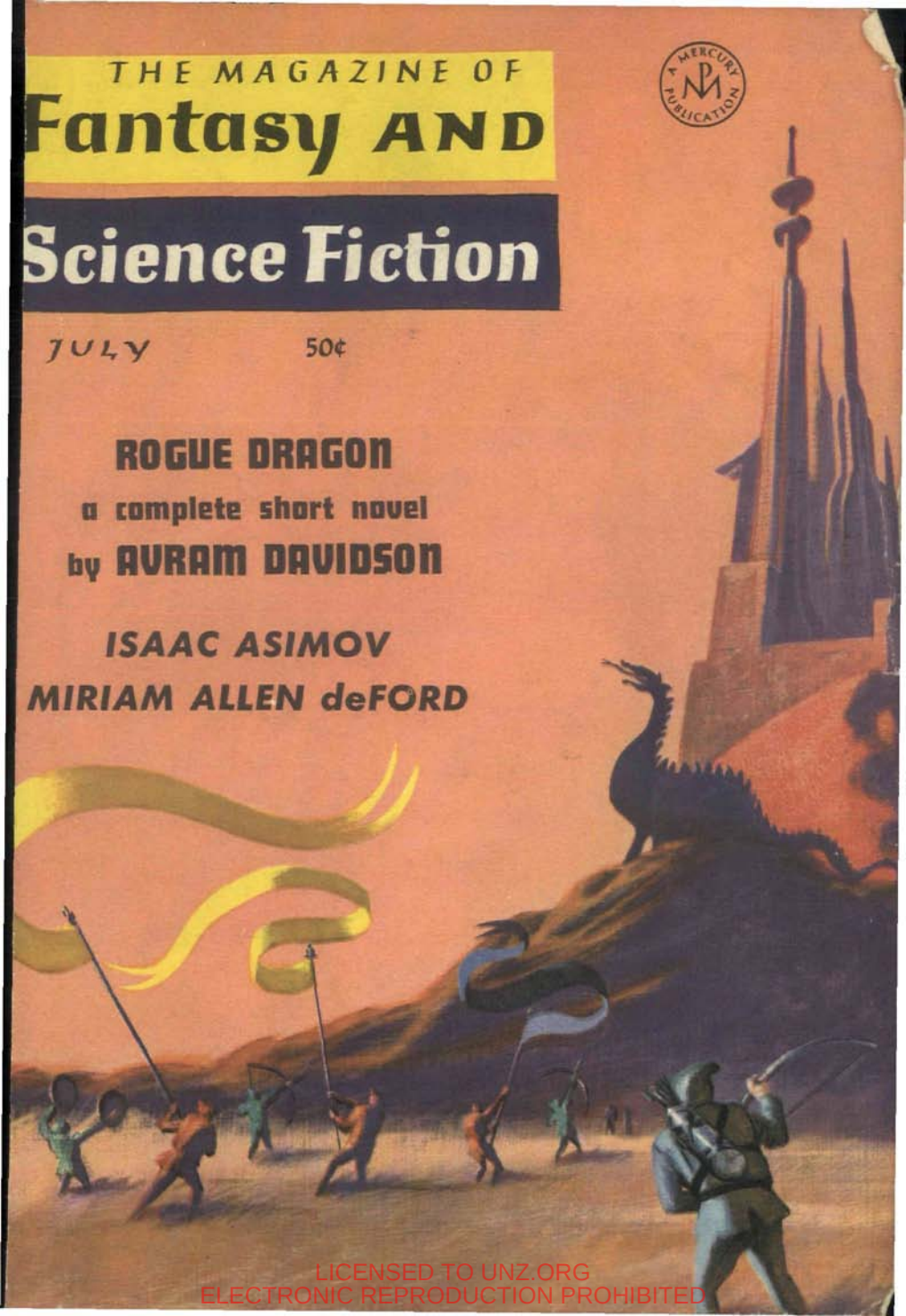
ROGUE DRAGON

a complete short novel

by **AVRAM DAVIDSON**

ISAAC ASIMOV

MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

JULY

Including Venture Science Fiction

Rogue Dragon *(short novel)*	AVRAM DAVIDSON	4
Computer Diagnosis	THEODORE L. THOMAS	62
Cartoon	GAHAN WILSON	63
The Expendables	MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD	64
Books	JUDITH MERRIL	78
The Eight Billion	RICHARD WILSON	84
Becalmed in Hell	LARRY NIVEN	93
Science: Exclamation Point!	ISAAC ASIMOV	104
A Murkle For Jesse	GARY JENNINGS	114
The Pterodactyl *(verse)*	PHILIP JOSE FARMER	128
F&SF Marketplace		129

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There is such a richness in the writings of Avram Davidson that we sometimes wondered whether they were best savored, like an expensive delicacy, in smaller servings. Several months ago, Mr. Davidson stepped down as editor of F&SF, moved to northern California, and began to devote much of his time to longer fiction. Result? He is even better in large doses. Witness this story of a distant-future, feudalized Earth, torn by conflict, hunting preserve for the rulers of the galaxy, habitat of the . . .

ROGUE DRAGON

by Avram Davidson

I

THEY HAD FLUSHED THE BULL-dragon in Belrose Woods and paced him for about a mile before he came up against the second line of beaters and turned to fight.

For a moment the whole hunt fell silent. Jon-Joras, feeling (so he thought) like a virgin at her first assignation, heard only the sound of his own troubled breath; felt sweat starting on face and body. The dragon seemed to crouch in his place on the far side of the clearing, crest quivering. A moment passed. The great head moved a trifle, uncertainly, and the faceted gem-like eyes rolled in their hooded sockets—blue, green, blue-green light flashing in the beam of moted sunlight which suddenly broke through the trees. Then, incredible how long it was, the red and bifurcated tongue leaped out from the mouth, quivered, tasted the air. It was blowing right towards him. Body rather than mind (if mind it had at all . . . and what thoughts must it think!) probably making the decision, the dragon darted off to the left.

Instantly the silence was shattered. The beaters were trotting left, clashing their cymbals and howling, the musics blaring on their harsh-voiced shawms. The archers (all neat and trim in their green tunics and leggings) nocked their arrows and poised. The dragon halted. At a signal, so swiftly that Jon-Joras scarcely saw the motion, a flight of arrows was loosed; in another instant were visible only as feathery shafts

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ridged in the great beast's side.

To say that the dragon hissed was only to confess a limitation of language: ear-drums trembled painfully at a sound the auditory nerves could but faintly convey. The dragon hissed. A spasm passed along the great, pierced flank, and tiny runnels of dark blood began their paths. The dragon halted, turned its head from side to side in search of its tormentors, its cheek-nodules swelling with rage. The wind shifted, bringing a rank, bitter odor to Jon-Joras. He felt his skin grow cold and his heart expand.

Then the bannermen ran forward, teasing their flags on their long poles. The hiss broke off suddenly and the air vibrated with the roar which succeeded it. Here, at last, was an enemy which the dragon could see! Head down and neck out-thrust, it began to move towards it. At the first, slowly and ponderously, each immense leg placed with care. The bannermen seemed almost now to dance in their traditional movements . . . the figure-of-eight, the fish, the butterfly . . . faster now . . . the wasp . . . the flags, white and red and green and yellow, whipping through the roar-tormented air.

And faster and faster came the great bull-dragon, now at a lumbering trot, turfs flying as the great splayed feet came pounding, shaking the ground. The cymbals ceased, the horns, too. The trot became a gallop, a charge, and the men broke into a shout as, in one sudden and tremendous movement, the dragon reared up upon its hind legs and came bounding forward upon them, its forelimbs slashing at the air. In one accord, the flags dropped to the ground, the bannermen swiftly twirled their poles, winding up the wefts at the ends of them. The colored cloths had danced and teased—suddenly, suddenly, they were gone; furled, grounded, hidden in the grass; and the bannermen crouched.

Bewildered, the great beast paused again. Twenty feet above the ground the huge head growled and rumbled and it turned from side to side. From the left, a flight of arrows stitched the now-exposed chest. The dragon screamed, the dragon tore at the barbs, it plunged in the direction from which they came. And the cymbals clashed three times and another flight of arrows, now from the right, stitched the creature hip and leg, and three more times the cymbals sounded and as the dragon sounded its pain and fury and swiveled its head again the bannermen twirled their palms and pinnacled their poles and once again their bright flags played upon the air.

The dragon bellowed and the dragon charged. Striped with the blood that coursed along its paler

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underside, it thundered down upon the bannermen. Once again flags and flagmen vanished. Once again the dragon paused. Again and again it hurled its great voice upon the wind. Jon-Joras saw, midway from throat to fork, like a blazon on its fretted hide, the white X-mark. He thought he could see the great pulse beating in the mark's crux, and then—sight and sound together—the crack of the huntgun behind him and the tic vanished in a gout of blood. The blood gushed forth in a great arched torrent. And the dragon stretched out its paws and talons, showed its huge and harrowing teeth in a scarlet rictus, sounded its harsh death-cry, and fell face forward onto the ground which trembled and shook to receive it.

"Pierced!" a voice cried the traditional acclamation, high and shrill and exultant and shaking. "Pierced! Pierced! *Dragon pierced. . . .* !"

It broke off abruptly as Jon-Joras suddenly recognized it as his own. And all the music sounded.

The man who shot the dragon was a Chief Commissioner Narthy from somewhere in The Snake, that distant constellation whose planets all seemed to abound in precious metals and rare earths . . . and rich, hunt-buying Chief Commissioners like Narthy.

Actually, the C.C. wasn't a bad sort, though quite different from Jon-Joras's own superior. He joined the ring of men—some with cameras—crowding around to congratulate him on his kill.

"A fine shot, Hunter!"

"Well-placed, Hunter!"

"—and well-timed—"

The Master was a stocky man with a sunburned, wind-cracked face; his name was Roedeskant, and, unlike most of the hunt-masters, who were of the Gentlemen, he was not, although bred on their estates. He had been cool and sufficiently self-assured during the hunt, but now—aware of the cameras and of his low-caste accent—he fumbled a bit.

Partly because he was embarrassed by the embarrassment of Roedeskant, and partly because the sight of pudgy, grinning Narthy being ritually bloodied did not much appeal to him, Jon-Joras turned and walked away. His own home world, the *beta* planet of Moussorgsky Minor, was nowhere near The Snake (where he had never been and never expected to or wanted to be). No one who knew him would see him in the 3Ds for which Narthy had paid a small fortune and which he would doubtless be showing to his friends — family — and associates — subordinates — and such superiors as he wanted to impress — for the rest of his life.

The scent of the strong-smelling grass rose, pungent, as he

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stepped on it heavily in his huntshoon, but it was not quite strong enough to overcome the bitter reek of dragon musk. A voice beside him said, "What a rotten shot!"

Surprised, rather than startled, Jon-Joras turned, said, "What?"

It was someone he didn't know, dressed in the white garments of a Gentleman—a tall fellow with bloodshot eyes and grizzled hair. "Rotten shot," the man repeated. "Badly timed, Trembly trigger finger, is what it was. These novices are all the same. Why—that bulldrag had at least another quarter-hour's good play in him! No . . . Don't tell me that Roe signalled him to shoot, I know better. Oh, well, *they* won't know better, back in The Lizard or The Frog or wherever *'Hunter'* Barfy or what's-his-name comes from—"

He looked at Jon-Joras with shrewd, blue eyes. "Not a Company man, are you?"

"No. I'm one of King Por-Paulo's private men. Jetro Yi, he *is* a Company man, is going to arrange the hunt for him. I'm just here in advance to make his personal arrangement."

The man in white grunted. "Well, to each his own, I don't hold with monarchies myself, having to renew your damned crown every five years, make concessions to the plebs and scrubs: poxy business, elections. No. But of course, no reflections on your own local king, mind." Having probably a notion of quickly changing the subject of his probable tactlessness, the Gentleman added, "Kind of young aren't you, a king's private man?"

The subject of his youth being a somewhat touchy one with Jon-Joras, he brushed back his shock of black hair and said, a bit stiffly, "Por-Paulo is a good man." His youth—and how he came, despite it, to hold his position. Brains, ability, judgment, and a top rating at the Collegium, all good reasons, sufficient ones, no doubt. But when a young man *is* young, and the son of a young (and lovely) mother, when he cannot remember his father, and when rivals in his peer group are ready enough to hint that he need look no further for his real paternity than the Magate with whom his mother is most often seen, why—

"No offense," repeated the older man. Then, "Your customs don't forbid self-introductions, do they? Good. Allow me, then." He stopped, put his hands out, palms up. "Aelorix," he said.

Jon-Joris stated his own name, placed his own hands, palms down, on the others. Aelorix said, formally, "I am yours and mine are yours."

Thankful that he had taken the trouble to look into local ways, Jon-Joris said, "Unworthy." Behind them, the musics struck up a tune of sorts and Narthy was led

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around the dead dragon. Aelorix raised his eyebrows and made a disrespectful noise.

"Base-born, I shouldn't wonder," he growled, indicating the triumphing chief commissioner with a jerk of his head. "Roedeskant is a good Huntsman, none better. But *he* knows his place, more than I can say for a lot of basies, local and otherwise, I remember when he was one of my old father's chick-boys. Fact. Where are you at, in the State?"

An implausible vision of the hefty Chief Huntsman as a bare-legged boy chasing dragon-chicks through the woods and thickets made Jon-Joras think a moment before he was able to answer the question. The . . . the *State* . . . oh, yes . . . confusing local speech-way: if the City proper was termed "the State," what did they call the whole City-State? Answer: by its name, of course. In this case, Peramis.

He said that he was staying at the Lodge. "That's no good," Aelorix shook his head. "No, the Lodge is no good. Stay with me. At Aelorix. What? Till your boss-chap arrives."

Jon-Joras, sensible of the compliment, flushed slightly. An invitation to stay at a Gentleman's seat, and the one from which he took his name and style—"Only proper, courteous, a king's private man," he heard his would-be host say—no common compliment, from all he'd heard and seen about the Gentlemen in the short time he'd been here on Prime World (*Earth,* the locals called it; name sounding so startlingly archaic on out-world ears). He could hardly refuse, of course. More—he wanted to accept.

He wanted to see for himself what the semi-feudal life was like at first hand. Then, it was his duty to his elected king, too: the more contacts he made, the more pleasant he could make Por-Paulo's stay. Only—

"Would it not be difficult," he said slowly, "if I am there, where I wish to be, to coordinate my work with Jetro Yi?"

For answer, the Gentleman pulled out an instrument like a whistle, blew a couple of notes on it. Immediately a man detatched himself from the throng and came running towards them. "Company Yi," called Aelorix, as soon as his servant was within hearing distance. The man nodded, made a sketchy, informal salute, and ran back. In a few moments he returned with Jetro, the latter not running, but coming at quite a brisk walk.

"Company, I want to host this young fellow at Aelor'."

Yi made his eyes go round, as if astonished there could be any objection. "Of *course,*" he said. "As the High Nascence *wishes.*"

"You're to keep in touch with him," the Gentleman ordered, as

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casually authoritative as if he were a director of the Company; "twice a day. And have his things sent over as soon as you get back to the State." ("Of *course*—of *course*—") "Get along, now." As Yi, having bowed almost to his navel, departed, Aelorix said, without malice, "Flunky . . ."

Somewhere downwind a cow drag blared her presence and her need; replying and following, the bull bellowed. Aelorix listened, his face puckered. He shook his head, seemed faintly puzzled, faintly disturbed. Jon-Joras asked if anything was wrong. "No . . . Not really at all. I know the cow . . . don't mean we've met, socially, but one becomes familiar with the calls of all the drags around, sooner or later . . . But I don't know the bull. Well, well." He took his guest by the arm. "Come along. Aelorix, ho!"

Aelorix-the-place seemed less an estate than a city-state of its own, repeating on a smaller scale the pattern into which all the civilized parts of ancient Earth had formed after the planet's emergence from the dark and painful chaos of the Kar-chee Reign. Its fields and groves were pleasant to see after the sombre forests, and at first Jon-Joras could not tell which of the many wooden buildings clustering closely where brook and river met was supposed to be his host's seat.

A scene in the market-place or courtyard quickly diverted his thoughts from this. A group was gathered around two men dressed in dirty hides who were arguing with what, by his manner, appeared to be an upper servant. This one looked up at the entrance of the Gentleman and said, "Ah, here's His Nascence."

"Here's the Big," muttered one of the men in leather—expressing the same thought in cruder speech. They looked to be brothers. And they looked sullen. One of them now picked up a filthy fibre bag, tumbled its contents on the cobbled ground. Jon-Joras stepped back. They were the severed heads of animals, one huge one with mottled teeth and bloody muzzle, the others tiny.

"There, now, Big," the man rumbled. "Look a' them!"

"Mmm . . ." Aelorix, noncommittal, gazed down. "What say, Puedeskant? Eh?"

"They gets their yearly dole," his man growled, stubborn.

"But look a' the *size* a' she!" one of the brothers protested. "Now, Big, ain't such a sizey bitch—and all o' them pups, look how many! —ain't them worth a bonus, Big?"

Aelorix grunted, prepared to move on, paused. To Puedeskant he said, "Give them some fish, then." The brothers seemed little appeased. Jon-Joras, looking back, saw the steward unclasp a knife and slash the ears of the strange

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animals. His host, following the look, smiled. "So they don't take the heads elsewhere, try the same trick. Dirty chaps."

"But who are they?"

"Doghunters . . . up here, guest—these steps." They began upon a long covered wooden walkway, curving gently upward and to the right, gardened courtyards on either side and potted plants and caged birds lining the rails below and above on the walk itself. The younger man admired the neatness and the taste of the scene, but tried to fit the spoken phrase into his recollection of his readings. *Doghunters* . . .

Suddenly the key fitted and the wards turned. "Free farmers!" he exclaimed.

He saw his hosts's mouth give a slight twist. "Fancy name," he said. "Doghunters. Useful in their way. But—dirty fellows."

Aelorix's wife was a pale woman in a full, embroidered robe. She sat, unseeing, at her instrument, from which came the flow of tinkling sounds, her ringed fingers moving across the keys with stiff but beautiful precision. Suddenly she saw or heard, perhaps felt them. The music ceased. Jon-Joras might not have been there, for all the notice she took.

"Ae, what news?" she cried.

"The usual," he said, shrugging. "A hunt—an out-worlder. Usual kill. Too quick, though—"

Lustrous eyes, beautiful face expressed something between anger and distress. "I don't mean that! Don't dissemble—what *news*?"

He hesitated, she saw it, he saw that he saw it. "You make too much of trifles, ma'am—"

"*Ae!*" . .

"Nothing but a bull-drag. Southward in Belroze Woods. An epithalamion. I didn't seem to recognize his cry. That's all."

An expression which was not relief, quite, but which yet relaxed the look of tense concern, passed across her lovely face. It did not linger long. Her long fingers left the instrument, came together before her throat, and clapsed.

"I do not like it," she said, almost as if to herself. "No. No. No . . . I do not like it . . ."

II

Although the 3D scoping equipment here on Prime World was as good as anywhere in the multiworld Confederation, the local economy did not run to any viewing system: the Hunt scenes could be shown off-world, not here, where communicatiions were nonvisual. Prime World was, as far as the Hunt Company was concerned, chiefly a game preserve; had been little more for centuries. The hand of the Confederation rested lightly, very lightly here. What was good enough for the Hunt Company in this now re-

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mote and passed-by globe seemed good enough for the Confederation.

The face of the communicator was nothing but an instrument board, and Jetro Yi, when he called in as directed next morning, was nothing but a voice.

"I'm lining up one of the best Hunters for your principal, P.M.," he said, in his usual important tones.

"That's good, Company."

"He's promised to draw us a prime bull. A five."

"How's that?"

"A *five*. Dragons are at prime at five years. After that, well, they begin to go downhill. And before that, too green. I mean, huh-huh, literally as well as figuratively, huh-huh. How would it look for your king to come back with a skin that anyone who *knows* anything, well, they could at one glance just tell by the color that he hadn't had a first-class hunt? Wouldn't look good at all. You take some of these pot-bellied parvenus, come here in a hurry, all *they* want is the prestige, well, huh-huh, if they draw a hen-dragon or an old crone, who's going to know the difference, the circles *they* move in; skin could be pea-green or rusty-black. But not for your principal, no sir, nothing to worry about."

"All right, Company."

"And I'll report tomorrow morning."

"All right, Company." When you had heard Jetro once you had heard him forevermore—unless you had a boundless appetite for the commerce of the hunt.

Leaving the communicator, he strolled at ease through the charming, rambling house out towards the training-grounds where he knew he would find his host.

Aelorix was on one side of the wide place of beaten earth where a group of young, naked-chested archers were shooting at training targets. An elderly bowmaster with stained white moustachios walked up and down behind them, a switch in his hand. The targets hung high in the air and swayed in the wind; whenever a cadet made what was deemed too bad a shot: *whisshh!*: the switch came down across the lower part of the back. "Mmhm," the Gentleman signified his approval. "Nothing better for the aim. Notice how careful old Foe is never to catch the shoulder-muscles. Ah . . . I see my boy's had one miss already this morning. Let's see if he has another."

They paused. Moedorix, Aelorix's younger son, a chestnut-haired boy in his middle-teens, stood in his place at line, a thin red wheal marking his skin just above his belt. The old man barked, the boy whipped out an arrow, raised his bow, let fly. Jon-Joras could not even see where the shot landed, but his host made a

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satisfied noise. The bowmaster paced his slow way down the line, said not a word of praise.

On the other side of the field several squads of bannermen danced about with bare poles. A sudden thought entered Jon-Joras's mind, passed his lips before he had time to consider if it were polite to mention it. "Isn't this sort of an establishment expensive to maintain?"

"In my case, yes, because I like to see my people here at home, not hired out for Hunts all over the place. And I don't take hunt contracts, myself. Don't have to. My older boy won't have to, either. But I suppose the younger will, unless I divide Aelodor', in my will, and I won't. Don't believe in it. Keep estates in one piece. I've got a smaller place up the river and the youngster shall have that, and I'll start him off with a small establishment of his own. The Company will see that he gets a few good contracts until his reputation firms up. (That's where most of your best Hunt Masters come from: younger sons, you know.) The Company knows me, I know the Company. Hate to think if we had to depend on Confederation."

He did not elaborate, but added, a trifle defensively, "Not that we, not that I, have to depend on the Company, either. Far back as memory goes, this family has never had to buy a haunch of venison, a peck of potatoes, or an ell of common cloth. Show me a Gentleman that does and I'll show you a family going down hill," he rambled on, proudly. "That's how Roedeskant got his estate, you know. Family that had it, never mind their name, extinct in the male line, anyway; they went *down* and he went *up*. Well, he earned it, I credit him, yes. Council of Syndics shall change his name to Roedorix at the next Session, or I've lost all my influence and shall engage myself as a Dog-hunter."

They had paused for him to watch the fletchers at work and to test a new batch of arrowheads with his thumbnail along the edges, when a party of several coming towards them through a grove of trees sighted them and called.

"Chick-boys . . . what are they doing back so soon?"

The boys—some of them actually *were* boys, shockheaded imps with gaptoothed grins, never having known a day's school or a pair of shoes; others were all ages up to greybeards who had been *boys* forty years ago—beckoned their lord and set down what they were carrying. These, as Jon-Joras came up, proved to be wicker baskets, covers tied on with ropes of grass; from within them came a shrill twittering sound.

"What's up, boys."

All talking at once, they undid the baskets. "Ah, now, Nasce',

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looka here at these beauties—" "Isn't they a fine lot, Nasce'?" "Have a eye on'm, won't y', Nasce' —" They held up about a dozen of young dragons, deep yellow with just a faintest tinge of green along the upper body in some of them.

"Very nice, very nice," Aelorix said, brusquely. "But if you've slacked off searching just to show me a bath of chicks— No. You wouldn't. What's up?"

They fell silent, eyes all turning to one man who stood by the sole unopened basket. He opened it now, reached in gingerly, winced, lunged, and drew out something which brought a roar from his lord. "What in blethers are you dragging *that* back for? It's not a chick, it's a cockerel—do you have six fingers and want to lose one?—and a marked cockerel, too! What—?"

The man with the gawky dragon-child needed both of his hands to hold it, but another one pointed to the mark, the grey X on the underside which would grow whiter with age. Aelorix bent over, silently to examine it as the chick-boy nudged the scaly under-hide with his scarred thumb, and the dragon-cockerel chittered and snapped at him.

The Gentlemen snapped up straight, his face red and ugly, cris-crossed with white lines Jon-Joras had not noticed before. "What son of a dirty drone marked that?" he cried. His rage did not surprise his men.

"Marky? Marky?"

An old, a shambling old chick-boy, whose incredibly acid-scarred hands testified to the contents of the ugly can he carried, shook his head slowly and sadly, eyes cast down. It might have been over the sorrow of a ruined grand-daughter.

"Not my stuff, Master Ae," he said. "Nope. That's a coarse stuff, very coarse, y' see." He prodded it with a caricature of a finger. "See how deep it's cut? I dunno a marky 'round here, 'r north, 'r south, who makes 'r uses stuff like such. And look where he put 'n, too."

"Yes," his master said, bitterly, "Yes, look. Cut its throat," he ordered, abruptly, and stalked away with quick, angry steps. Suddenly he stopped and turned back. "Not a word to any one! The Ma'am is not to hear of this." It was a long few minutes before his breathing calmed enough for him to say to his mute guest, "Young man, you must amuse yourself for a while. I must counsel with my neighbors on something. Pray pardon and excuse."

Peramis was not much different from other of the city-states of Prime World, that ancient planet from which the race of Man had begun its spread across the galaxies. It had stripped itself bare, exhausting its peoples and its min-

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erals, in launching and maintaining that spread. So it was that, population dwindled and resources next to nil, at a time when the son-and daughter-worlds were occupied in their own burgeoning imperialisms, old Earth had had to stand alone when the Karchee —the black, gaunt, mantis-like Kar-chee—came swooping down from their lairs around the Ring Stars. Alone, Earth, and almost defenseless. And, defenseless (in all save native wit) and alone, what remained of her people had had to fight their way up.

The establishment of Confederation, and a belated recollection of and attention to the first home of Man, found scarcely a remnant of the old status still remaining. Gone were the great cities, gone the great states and leagues of states. There might have remained even less than a little, had not the Kar-chee been perhaps more interested in the sea than in the land. In response to impelling plans and reasons known only to themselves, masses of land had been blasted and submerged; others had been heaved up out of the primordial muck. Rivers had been changed in their courses, mountains laid low, mountains raised high.

The old maps were of limited use, where useful at all; and Jon-Joras, gazing at the slow-turning, giant model globe in the lobby of the Lodge, was obliged to forget his ancient history. That done, it was no great feat to locate Peramis, Sartor, Hathis and Drogue, the four city-states which—nominally, at least—divided between themselves the land-mass (more than a peninsula, less than a subcontinent) most frequented these days by those bound on dragon-hunts.

Aelorix of Aelorix had been right enough in his way. Dragon might perhaps not be the deadliest game, but they were the most prestigious. In ancient legends, preserved in richest form in the worlds of the Inner Circle, first of those settled in the great wave of expansion, there were references to dragons. They did not seem to fit the present-day creatures at all. One theory had it that the dragons of the mythic cycles had retreated deep into forests and so escaped the attention of reputable historians, evolution . . . mutation . . . accounting for the apparent changes.

Others would insist that the Kar-chee brought the beasts with them, pointing to the existence in all their ruined castles of great sunken amphitheaters which the remnants of Man on Earth united in calling "dragon-pits."

One thing alone seemed fairly certain despite all the several theories: Before the Kar-chee came, if there were dragons on Prime World, no one knew of it. And by the time the Kar-chee ceased to

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trouble, the presence of the dragons was one of the great realities of Terrene life. Somewhere, somewhen during the Kar-chee Reign and the chaos, the mystique of the dragon-hunts had developed. And by now, centuries after, it was the only resource of the despoiled planet.

"Odd to think we all came from there," someone, pointing, said over Jon-Joras's shoulder as he stood musing before the circling globe.

He nodded, half-turned. It was the Confederation archaeologist, a certain Dr. Cannatin, whom he had from time to time heard lamenting in bar-lounge or Lodge-lobby the effort involved (and the money!) in dredging up a single artifact of the ancient days—or rejoicing on the latest one he had managed, nevertheless, to find.

"How is your new dig coming along?" Jon-Joras asked, politely.

Cannatin, middle-aged, fat, and depilated according to the custom of his native world (wherever it was), looked rather like an ambulatory egg. His round mouth made a grimace. "Hardly getting anywhere at all. The plebs . . . that's not what they call them here, is it? No matter. Dogrobbers? Dog*hunt*ers. Free farmers, as they like to be called—hard people to deal with. Rather, they would, dig potatoes than building sites. Hunt ruins? Rather hunt dogs. And I have to pay through the nose when I can get them, too." He sighed.

"I'm thinking of giving up around here, setting up a base camp on the far side of the river, near Hathor."

Jon-Jethro asked if the lower class in Hathor was more amenable to archaeology, and Cannatin shook his naked head. "Not thinking of *them*, I'm thinking of the nomads. The tribespeople. There's a few of their main trails converge over that way. Now, these people going wandering in and out and all around. They must know of sites nobody's even heard of. So I'm moving. And *soon*—"

The sudden note of urgency surprised Jon-Joras, but before he could inquire, Cannatin, with a mumbled excuse, hurried away.

Jetro Yi was not at the Lodge, so Jon-Joras thought he would look for him at the Hunt Company's offices, seeing more of the "state" en route. A number of pony-traps in the road outside the spacious Lodge grounds solicited his custom, but he preferred to walk. Usually, the streets in this part of Peramis town were quiet, with few pedestrians; but scarcely had Jon-Joras crossed through the park at the next crossroads when he began to hear crowd noises.

A bend in the stately, tree-lined promenade brought him in sight of the throng, moiling around on the wide mall in front

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of an important-looking building with a white plastered portico.

A blind beggar squatting on the pave lifted his head as Jon-Joras approached. "No room in the Court, your Big," he croaked, raising his cupped palms and asking a donation. Jon-Joras gave him something and, wondering at the crowd, asked what was going on in court. The beggar canted his head as if to assure himself that no one else was near, said, "Ah, your Big, it's that dirty Doghunter what killed the Gentleman. For why? Claims the hunts people trampled his 'tato patch. Course they paid 'n for it, aways does. But them Doghungers is mean greedy, never gives nothing to a blind man, wanted more, he done. Gentleman give him a piece of stick to bite on, they fights and he kills 'n."

Jon-Joras left him whining and walked on to the mall. A small group of Gentlemen were standing close together in earnest talk; one of them, with repeated angry gestures towards a larger plot of plebs, seemed urging some sort of action. Jon-Joras's path led him athwart the larger group, and he paused a ways away to listen.

"—dirt, less than dirt," a burly man in a greasy buckskin which left half his broad, hairy chest exposed, was saying. "First comes their own kind, then comes their bloody dragons, then comes their damned servants what kisses their backsides, and then comes their pishy customers from out-worlds. Out-worlds! Did out-worlds help us when the Kar-chee come?" His hearers growled and shifted. "And as for us, 'less than dirt,' I says. We is good enough to hunt the wild dogs in the woods to keep things safe, but no more'n that. 'Free farmers,' we calls ourselfs. Hah! How free c'n we be when our fields what we plants with sweat is no more to them than a path to run on or a waste-grounds to trompie on?"

Times there are when the much goes slow and the little, quick; but now it was that the much went quick—and quicker yet. A cry echoed down the mall, all heads turned, nearer, near, from the Court—*"Guilty! Guilty! Death!"* A shout, fiercely triumphant, from the Gentlemen—the man in the buckskin hurled himself upon them—in an instant the mall was a mass of bloody turmoil into which Jon-Joras felt himself carried away. He struck out, was struck back at.

The crowd, now become a mob, surged back and forth. He fell on one knee, lifted his arms to ward off being trampled on. But the mob had swarmed elsewhere. For the moment he was safe, and then, looking around as he began to rise, he saw the girl on the ground to his right. She was slender and slight and pale, a trickle of blood upon her face.

He started to lift her up, she

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opened her eyes, her face convulsed with rage, she struck at him, leaped away free; in another moment she was lost in the screaming crowd.

III

The mob did not manage to free the convicted man but did manage to wreck the Court House thoroughly, and was in the act of burning it when the hastily summoned soldiery attacked. The standing army of the City-State of Peramis was small, but it was disciplined and the mob was not. Hence the battle, though nasty and brutish, was also short. The plebs, still roaring defiance, scattered, leaving their dead behind them.

The murderer, who had killed the Gentleman in a fight over more compensation for his hunt-trampled crops, was executed as scheduled; and in the usual manner: bound and gagged and hanged by his feet in the main square, he was filled with arrows by a squad of masked archers.

Whether this was a mistake or not, was much discussed at the Lodge. Chief Commissioner Narthy, killing time until the arrival of the weekly aerospace ferry for ConfedBase the only area of Earth under direct Galactic rule, it was located on the landmass which the Kar-chee had created out of the Andaman Islands—"Hunter" Narthy, treating the lounge-bar to a farewell round of drinks, insisted it was a mistake.

"Why, they've given the mob a martyr," he said, sipping. "Everyone of those poor, down-trodden plebs that witnessed the execution is a potential rebel leader. No . . . the execution should have been carried out privately, if at all. Then a program of education and land-reform, taking into cogniscence the legitimate aspirations of the pleb-peoples—"

But an elegantly-dressed trader from the Blue Worlds shook his head. On the contrary, he said, to do in secret what had always been done in public would have been to admit to a fear of the mob. And nothing, he said, is more calculated to increase a mob's power.

"Besides," he went on, caressing his glass, "*what* 'legitimate aspirations of the pleb-peoples' exist? Every Doghunter would like to be a Gentleman, and who can blame him? But who can agree that this is a legitimate aspiration? An armada can't consist of all admirals, can it? As for the right of Hunts to go across plowed land—why, it's part of the age-old principal of eminent domain. This planet has no other resource but its Hunts, no other justification for Confederation being here—or for anyone from outside ever visiting the place."

A middle-aged Company PR man nodded. "And without us," he said, "the place would sink back

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into barbarism. You can't base a civilization on planting potatoes. No—we owe it to our ancient Mother World to continue our fructifying contact with it."

However convinced the loungebar was, much of the poopulation of Peramis thought otherwise. The atmosphere in the streets was hostile, several visitors were jostled or stoned, and that night a Gentleman's country seat was attacked and burned and a number of its loyal servants slain. All in all, Jon-Joras thought he understood why Dr. Cannatin had decided to set up his base of operations elsewhere. He sought out Jetro Yi.

"What do you think of arranging my king's hunt in another city-state?" he asked. "Sartor or Hathis or Drogue? It would not do for his visit to be disturbed by all this."

But Jetro most earnestly opposed this. He doubted that such arrangements could be completed in time—he was, in fact, certain that they could not. Jon-Joras afterwards concluded that Jetro was likely much more concerned with the loss of his commission if the Hunt were held in another district . . . but he felt himself ill-equipped to argue against those who held the local ground. He allowed himself to be persuaded that the trouble was dying down (indeed, it did seem to be), and set to work on his own task of preparing for Por-Paulo's visit. Perhaps it was that he worked too hard on it, and this may have been why he accepted rather quickly, rather to his own surprise, when Roedeskant the Master Huntsman invited him to come on an impromptu dragon hunt. When second thoughts occurred the flyer was already on its way and it was too late.

"A big drag's been sighed by the river fallows what's part of the Lie lands," Roeleskant explained. "I b'lieve it's quite all right for you to have a try at a shot before your liege arrives, since it's an impromptu, and won't count. Informal, won't give you a title if you pierce your dragon, you see."

Over the forests, denser and denser as they proceeded upriver, the thick meadows and marshlands, the flyer made its way. The atmosphere was cheerful and relaxed. An impromptu hunt was evidently quite a different thing from a regular one. Many of these aboard were younger sons—some of them surprisingly young, including that son of Aelorix whom Jon-Joras had seen at target practice. Evidently the archers today were all gentlemen amateurs.

"Drag's a monstrous big one, I hears," said Roedeskant. "The tenant at Lie village sent word down by boat. Don't know his call, they says."

"A wanderer, I suppose. Seems to me that there've been rather a few more of those than usual, wouldn't you say?" someone asked.

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A shadow seemed to fall over the Master Huntsman's face. "P'raps so, your High," he muttered. Young Aelorix looked at him, suddenly sombre. Then someone started a song, and, one by one, everyone joined in.

The dragon I met in the morning,
I followed him all the day.
I'd waited since my borning,
My dragon for to slay.

"Getting there," someone said. "There's the island—"

The musics they grew tired,
Their horns they sounded hoarse,
But with zeal was fired
As I paced my dragon's course.
The archers fired a volley,
My dragon for to turn,
When I saw him turn in folly,
My heart with joy did burn.

It was hardly great music or good poetry, Jon-Joras thought, wryly. In fact, it was rather dreadful. But it had a swing and a beat to it. The Aelorix cadet was singing lustily, beating his fists on his naked knees.

My dragon rushed on towards me,
His talons ripped the air.
My bosom swelled with wonder
To see this sight so rare.
My dragon roared like thunder,
His mighty teeth all bare.
My life cannot afford me
More joy than I had there.
I sighted on his crux-mark,
His vital part to pierce—

The rest of the words were lost to Jon-Joras in the babble of voices as the flyer put down in a clearing in the woods, not a great distance from the river. A small group of men was waiting for them; one of them, a tall stalwart fellow in his thirties, dressed in fine-spun, proved to be the tenant—the others were his sub-tenants. By his manner of speech he might almost have been a Gentleman himself, and, indeed, Jon-Joras had learned from the casual comments of the company, that he was the natural son of one.

The bannermen were in the acts of fastening the colored wefts to the ends of their long poles when the low, rather mournful cry broke upon their ears. All heads went up, turned this way and that. They sniffed the wind like animals. "Not too far off," Roedeskant muttered. "*None* too far off . . ."

But he quickly got things in order, and while he was doing so, repeated the instructions he had given Jon-Joras in the flyer. "Don't fire until you're told to," he concluded; "If you *are* told to. And aim *only* at the crux of the X, remember that. If you hits it, you pierces the only nerve-ganglion that counts. Otherwise you can spend the rest of your life shooting into him, if he'd let you—Holy Father! Already!"

He shouted. Lights glinted onto faceted eyes. The youngsters shouted, Roedeskant flashed his

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arms, cymbals sounded and shawms blared. The dragon came hurtling out of the woods. The bannermen lanced and waved, to draw him to the right. He ignored them. Cymbals clashed, arrows flew. He ignored them. Bannermen and archers closed in towards him, running. The dragon, running swiftly, too, ignored them. He reared up upon his hind legs and the archers filled the hide of his belly with their barbs and this time he did not ignore them.

Pivoting upon one great jointed column of a leg, he came pounding down upon the archers. "Oh, blood!" someone cried. "A rogue! A rogue! *Rogue dragon!*"

The bannerman flew like deer, teasing their bright flags under his very snout. He roared. They downed their poles and fell, hidden, to the grass. The dragon did not stop, came charging on. Screams and turmoil in the grass.

Blood upon the great clawed feet of the dragon.

"Shoot free, shoot free!" Roesdeskant shouted. "Anyone with a sight—shoot free!"

Jon-Joras saw three men raise their guns, fire almost together. The dragon came on, the dragon came on, two more shots, then three, then four, the dragon came on. The archers held their ranks, firing their useless shafts. Not one turned to run. And the dragon, hissing, screaming, flanks and chest and sides and stomach bristling with arrows, bleeding, eyes flashing dreadful beauty, the dragon stooped upon the archers. His talons swept to right and left, his head darted down, came up, jaws grinding, head tossing through the reddened air.

The son of Aelorix fired his last shaft as the great bull-dragon's claws swept him off his feet. The boy's mouth was open, but no song now came from it.

The beast was everywhere, and so, at least, he was in the sights of Jon-Joras's gun. *Aim only at the crux of the* X . . . He remembered Roedeskant's voice (where was Roedeskant now?) saying the words. But the crux of the X had been obliterated by all the shots poured into it, was a gaping and bloody chasm. Unthinking, automatically, into it he fired his own shot. And fired. And fired. And—

Someone ran into him full-tilt. His last shot before the gun fell went wild. The man, whoever he was, beat upon him with clenched fists, screaming in terror; at last threw him down and ran. Stunned, scarcely able to breath, Jon-Joras felt the concussion of the great beast's feet, saw out of the corner of his eye, something vast, something blood-stained go sweeping by. There were screams and screams. A voice cried out, shrill, thickened, ceased.

The sky darkened, wheeled, became a whirling concentric circle.

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Jon-Joras felt himself go sick and cold. And all was black.

Somewhere in between his fainting and his awakening he had heard what he now identified as the sound of the flyer. A sudden tenseness of his muscles warned him just in time to turn his head. He vomited. Then, fearful, lay back for a long moment. But there was nothing to be heard except the drone of flies.

The sun was out and birds called. How many people had come on the impromptu hunt, Jon-Joras, numbed by the sickening sights that lay all about, did not know. Nor could he guess how many made their escape in the flyer (if any but the pilot had) or into the woods. No one answered his calls . . . at first . . .

Only when he held the bloodied head on his knees did he realize that he had never known the boy's name. Aelorix's boy stared blindly right into the sun. "Tell . . . tell my mother . . ." he began.

"I will. I will," Jon-Joras said. And waited. And waited. But the dead lips spoke no more. Tell his mother! What could he tell her, he wondered, that she had not already guessed and feared!

Numbly following the custom of his own people, he lay a clot of earth on each closed eye, and straightened the arms at full length, folding the hands together in a loose clasp, into which he thrust a green branch. *"Ended is this scene and act,"* he said. *" 'May the curtain rise upon a fairer one . . .'."* He could not remember the rest of it.

When you have no idea in which direction anything is, it makes as much sense to go in one direction as another. The river and the Lie village were not too far away, but he had no notion where. The sensible thing was obviously to wait right where he was until help came. But this was the one thing he could not do—not at that field of death, over which the dark birds had already begun to circle.

He made a circle of his own around the clearing, and took the first path he found. The afternoon was late indeed before he dared admit that, wherever the path led, it did not lead to the Lie village. And then he heard the dogs. It should not have come to him as the heart-swelling surprise it did. Where there were Doghunters, there were bound to be dogs. Besides, had he not seen their severed heads? Recalling the mottled teeth in the bloody muzzle, he broke into an awkward, stumbling run.

Someone was there, he saw the glimmer of cloth off to one side on the slope. Instantly upon his outcry, it vanished, and he left the path to follow, leaping over fallen trees and little rivulets running

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through the soft, mossy earth. Someone was there ahead of him in the darkening daylight . . .

A girl.

"Please!" he called. "I won't hurt you! I don't want— They're all dead, all the others—the rogue dragon—"

She stopped at that; stopped and whirled around. The shock of it stopped him, too. For a moment they stood staring at one another. It was the girl he had tried to help on the Court House mall; the girl who had struck at him, run away, as she was, in the next instant, running now.

"Wait," he cried. The dogs—!" They were nearer now, and nearer and nearer; they seemed to be all around him. He could no longer see the girl. He snatched up a stick of thick wood and looked to see a large tree that he could get his back against—or, better, climb. But he was passing through an area that had been burned over not many years enough before; there were no large trees at all.

"Don't run!" A man's voice. He whirled around. The dogs had been on all sides of him because the men who were leading them on thick ropes of braided leather were on all sides of him. He let out his relief in a gusty sigh and let the stick drop.

"Oh, Lord . . . I'm so glad to see you . . . I was on the hunt, back there—" he gestured, indefinitely; he no longer knew just how far or in what direction "back there" was. The men were dressed in hides and cloth; two of them handed over their leashes to others and came toward him.

"—It was a rogue dragon, and it wouldn't die, it wouldn't *die*—" his throat.

The two men looked at each other. Little lights seemed to kindle in their eyes.

"Was it?" said one.

"Wouldn't it?" said the other.

They came up to him and he put out his hand. With untroubled but with deft emphatic movements, one took that hand and one took the other and they swung them behind his back and tied them fast with thongs.

"Walk on," said one. "Just walk. No tricks. It's easier to let loose the dogs than to hold on to them."

He picked up Jon-Joras's stick and thumped him in the ribs with it. *"Walk!"* he said, again. Jon-Joras walked.

IV

The dogs loped alongside, from time to time looking up at him—hungrily, it seemed. Their eyes glowed red in the torch-light.

The uncertain, flaring light showed nothing that told him where he was. Not on the interminable path any more, for certain; it was not wide enough for three men to walk abreast. One of the men grunted, pointed. Another,

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nodding, said something which vanished into a yawn. Jon-Joras, following the gesture, saw a great black block of rock canted at an angle. Vines grew over it. There was another. And another. The soft thudding of their feet suddenly began to echo, the air was instantly closer. They were in a tunnel of some sort; a tunnel which wound always up-hill. The smell was faint, but it was an alien smell, and he shuddered at it.

A wave of cool air washed his face, the echo vanished. Stars were overhead, but only overhead . . . not to the sides. He felt, rather than saw, the encircling wall which must be there. Where this place was, and *what* this place was, he had no idea. But he felt certain that it was never built by the men who held him captive.

The hunt itself had taken toll of him a drain of nervous energy equivalent to many days hard work; his long walk, his flight from the dogs, the ride . . . Vaguely, he was aware of being half-carried down a long, winding ramp into a room where torches blazed in sockets on walls so high he did not see the tops. Food was set before him, and his bonds removed. He ate, nodded, slumped onto the table.

But even in his sleep he heard the hissing, heard the low, almost melancholy call, of the dragon.

He awoke on a pile of hides and rushes, sunlight streaming through a window very high up. He blinked. It was not a window, but a breach in the smooth black wall that went up and up and up . . . The room he was in was not quite a well, a partition of planks which scarcely reached higher than his head. He began to get up, stopped. A man, presumably a guard, with his hand on the knife in his belt was looking at him. Not hostilely, in particular, but certainly watchfully. At his call, a toothless old woman came bustling in with a bowl of hot water and a rag.

"Wash up and let's get along," the guard said.

Jon-Joras was glad of the wash, such as it was, and set to scrubbing heartily. Then the guard gestured him out into the hall which sloped down between the partitions. Again the light coming through the hole far up caught his attention. He followed the shaft of sunlight to where it lit on the opposite, and it was there that something struck his attention.

It appeared to be a frieze; high up as it was, and a bad angle for vision, obscured in places by dirt and cobwebs, he could not clearly make it out. But one figure seemed to leap into focus. It was not a human figure. With a blink and a shudder, he understood. He was in one of the ruined and abandoned Kar-chee castles.

But who the people were who had moved into it as a hermit-crab

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moves into an abandoned shell, he had yet to learn. . .

Victualling arrangements for prisoners seemed on the informal side. From one person, the guard commandeered a fried egg, from another, a boiled potato. The other courses of the make-shift breakfast were provided the same way.

To the guard he said, "I'm not complaining . . . but how is it I'm not tied anymore?"

The man rubbed his broken nose and said, matter-of-factly, "You won't get out of here until we're ready to let you. Other than that, it's Liberty Hall." He chuckled briefly.

Jon-Joras said, "But I must get out of here. I have duties . . . outside."

The guard gave a grim little nod. "We all have duties . . . outside. For the time being, though, some have our duties . . . inside . . . as well."

"Forgive me. But—you don't talk like a Gentleman *or* like a Doghunter. I'm an outworlder, and easily confused."

"I'll tell you. At one time I lived in the State. The town or city, I mean. Drogue. Never been there? Not much of anything. I liked it, though. I was a shopkeeper. Had a little house on the outskirts. A garden plot." His sentences got shorter and his face grew redder. "My land bordered a Gentleman's, you see. Oegorix, rot his blood . . . One day I came home. Tired. Sit in my garden, I thought.

"Garden? You see one here? That's what I saw there. His High —" —the word he uttered was not "Nascence." "—had decided to extend his training grounds. So. Rather than take a chunk out of his own grass or garden, he merely appropriated mine. Not a flower, not a plant did he leave me. His bloody musics were tramping up and down and under my window where the rosebeds had been."

In the fight that followed, the shopkeeper had gotten his broken nose. He went from his house to find his shop wrecked, returned from his shop and saw the smoke of his burnt house. "So I went to Hathis. But things no better there I found. The Gentlemen do as they like in every place. Except here. Here, we do as *we* like. But we don't like it here, much. And sooner or later . . ."

His mouth twitched. Then he said, in a smothered voice, "You'll see. Go on, now."

In some ways it was as if a highly eccentric Gentleman had moved his estate, herds, followers, chick-boys and all, into the black basalt ruin of the Kar-chee castle—and then mixed it all up, humble-tumble. Here a woman hung a cloth bag full of soft cheese to drip, there a fletcher picked through a pile of feather in his aproned lap. A young boy practiced scales on an old horn. A

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woman on a stool stitched colored cloths into banner wefts, from time to time giving her rather dirty baby's cradle a rock with her bare (and dirtier) foot.

A vision of the shattered face of the boy with chestnut hair rose before Jon-Joras's inner eyes. What connection there might be between that bloody death and this curious wild encampment, he did not know; only that he felt a stirring conviction within him that such a connection there was. And then, through the contented confusion of the courtyard, a man with a scarred face picked his way.

He did not see, or seem to see, the prisoner at large—or for that matter, anyone else—but everyone saw him and marked his passage. The man was tall, with little deep-set eyes under black brows like nests of snakes. The bones of his face seemed about to burst through the reddened skin, the mouth was an all but lipless slash between the grim nose and the almost impossibly long and heavy chin. The scar went from scalp to neck, interrupted only by the stump of one ear. His feet tramped the black slabs as if all his enemies lay upon them.

Almost automatically, Jon-Joras stopped still and drew in upon himself until the man passed; entirely automatically, he fell in behind—well behind—him. Only as he followed after the unnaturally stiff figure, hands clenched at sides, did the formed thought reveal itself to his upper mind: *where this man was, the answer was.*

And so, passing through the wake of whatever emotion lies between fear and awe, Jon-Joras followed on as if drawn by rope and held by magnet.

Perhaps it was only a dream dragon that he had heard in his sleep that night. But the one he heard now was no dream—unless this whole scene, Kar-chee castle and court and all, unless *it* was a dream, too. His ear-drums vibrated with the hiss that became a scream. But . . . *perhaps* it was a dream! . . . no one else so much as looked up. And still the man walked on, and on.

He stopped only at a low wall and there he leaned over. Jon-Joras walked on a bit, then put his hands on the parapet and peered. The thick, dark odor of dragon caught him sharply between nose and throat, but he didn't turn away. Below him in an area partly ringed with seats, and partly with a channel of water which emptied through a crack in the wall, a dragon came rushing down the ground. His hide was thick with arrows and the stumps of arrows, and a smell Jon-Joras knew from other places, other times, came from the beast—the fishy stench of old, of rotten blood.

At first glance the scene below

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appeared to be a normal dragon hunt. Almost at once, though, Jon-Joras saw the differences. It was like seeing double. There, for instance, was the row of archers. But behind them was another row. The arms and hands and bows of the archers moved. The row behind them, clad in the same leaf-green, moved not. And in front of the row of archers was a trench.

The dragon came beating down the ground. Another flight of arrows bored into his hide. He neither plucked at them nor slackened pace. The thought came into Jon-Joras's mind, *this one is no virgin!* At his near approach, the front row of bowmen seemed to vanish into the earth—one jump—the narrow trench, too narrow for a dragon-paw received them. The row of dummies swayed slightly on the shaking ground. But the dragon ignored them. Unwavering, it rushed on and on.

From behind a low earthen wall directly in his path, up leaped a row of figures, bright banners waving on long poles. Jon-Joras had to squint and peer a moment before realizing that these, too, were dummies. The dragon plunged on through their midst. Jon-Joras flung his head around and his eyes flew down the arena to see what lay dead ahead of the plunging questing beast. He had not far to look.

There were the figures in huntsmen's clothes, guns in hands. Bellowing his hatred, pain and rage, the dragon came on and on and in great, maddened leaps; flung himself upon the group. Jon-Joras had not seen this one trench. He blinked as the figures vanished into it. All but one of the figures vanished into it—that one, a dummy fastened to a stake, flew first right, then left, then was lifted high into the air to be worried as a rat in the jaws of a dog.

"And that's what happens to our enemies," said the man with the scarred face, turning suddenly around. "That's what I wanted you to see. You, outworlder. Because—You don't know, does you? What's been going on here on our old Earth? Think about the worst enemy they's ever had in your world. Times it by ten and add to it. And think what rotten things would be that bad an enemy. Would *that*—down *there*—be too bad for it, Oh, no. No . . . Too, good." The voice fell lower on the last word, and the effect was somehow more frightening than when it rose. The tiny eyes glinted. The thin mouthed stretched.

One hand came up, carressed the mutilated skin running from neck to scar. "You know how I got this, boy? Someone . . . Someone with an -ix to the tail of his name did it to me. I was just small of size then, but he decided I wasn't meek enough to suit him. Maybe he was drunk a little, too. But, drunk or sober, he picked me

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up by the scruff and tossed me in with a dragon-cockerel."

The scarred face, the suddenly-clawed hands, worked and twitched. Gazing into those half-crazed eyes, Jon-Joras seemed to feel himself the fear and the terror of that cruel moment long ago.

"How's it that I'm still alive? Did he relent and pull me out? Oh, no, boy. Never think any Gentleman knows mercy. He wasn't merciful. But he knew sport. It funned him to watch. I screamed and I messed myself . . . but I killed that cockerel. Don't ask me how. I did., I had to. I forgets how. But I don't forget anything else. *I don't forget anything else!*"

He sucked in broken gusts of air through distended nostrils.

"My name is Hue," the tall man said, abruptly. "Not Huedeskant and not Huelorix—just Hue. Never mind telling me yours, I known it since you come here. We been watching you. We watches everyone. . . . His sentence ended on a significant pause.

"Where was the dragon hunt yesterday. Near the Lie village. Tell me about it. *All* about it."

His gaunt, scarred face remained impassive, but his tiny eyes glittered under his medusa's brows. Then he was silent a while.

"All right," he said, answering an unspoken question. "Here it is, see. What justifies the Gentlemen, that they lives on others' labor and does what they likes with others? Why—they hunts drags. Yes. And the drag is terrible big and terrible dangerous. Isn't he? Of course. You has to go out after him with beaters and musics and bannermen and archers and guns. Yes. And to make damned sure that you kills him, you takes him when he's a chick and marks him with acid—feels carefully for that certain spot and paints the X so the crux is right over it. Correct?"

Jon-Joras nodded.

"All right," said Hue. "Now. If the Gentlemen really had any interest in putting down dragons, they'd have the chick-boys kill 'em . . . and not mark 'em. Right?"

"Yes, of course—but you're making a point that no one needs to have made. Of course they preserve dragons, the whole place is nothing but a big preserve."

Hue said, "Right. And they's the game wardens. And what're we? Poachers? We lives here, too. Haven't we got no rights? No. None. Once in ten years, maybe, one of us is lucky enough to get took on as a servant to a Gentleman. And once in, maybe a hundred years, some servant gets made a Gentleman—"

"Roedeskant!"

"Yes . . . Roedeskant . . . Does he remember what his grandser was? His stick is heavier against us than anyone's. Or *was*. Don't know, yet, if he got away alive. But, to go back. The drags, now—"

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His flat voice droned on. But Jon-Joras was far from being bored at what Hue had to tell him, told him with the endless attention to and reiteration of detail of which only the monomaniac is capable. Distilled, it amounted to a realization that the dragon, *if left alone,* was harmless: a sort of gigantic chicken, with no brain to speak of. No one needed beaters to go round up the *sundi* of planet Nor so that they would come and be hunted; it was not necessary to tease and to confuse dire-falcon of the aeries of Gare with banners and musics and archers.

The entire principle of the ritual murder which constituted a dragon hunt was *misdirection.* Anyone in good health and who could keep his head, could manage to stay out of a dragon's way—if the dragon was not goaded into frenzy. Such skill as there was in a hunt was mostly on the part of the bannermen. The function of the archers was only to goad the beast—and create a picturesque pattern of arrows on his hide—and make him rear upright, so that his X mark was exposed. Anyone who could hit a moving target could kill a dragon.

And the dragon was thus always killed.

Wasn't it?

Pea-brained as the species was, the individual members were still, like any creature, capable of learning something from experience. But no dragon was allowed to do so, under the Hunt system: All talk of small, feeble Man the Hunter pitting himself against the skill and cunning of the great dragon was cant and hypocrisy. The novice dragon had neither skill nor cunning, just his teeth, his talons, and his weight. Now and then it had happened, over the years, that some trembling finger on the trigger did manage to miss. If the dragon then turned and ran from the guns, his one vulnerable spot no longer visible—if the same dragon, escaped, was unlucky enough to come across another hunt—and again escape—

"Why, then, boy, you got the one thing that every Gentleman fears more than anything in the world. You got a dragon that knows better. You got *a rogue dragon!*"

Light blazed in Jon-Joras's mind. His body, which had been drooping with stiffness and fatigue, jerked straight upright. "And that's what you're doing here!" He cried. "There—in the dragon pit—you're training rogues!"

V

Hue's scarred head nodded, nodded slowly. "That's exactly what we're doing in the dragon pits. *We're training rogues.* We're training the drags so that they'll

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know better than to be distracted by banner-wefts and music. We're training them so that they won't waste time plucking at arrows. By the time we're done and he's ready to be released, you've got a dragon that's what the Master Huntsmen claim every drag really is." His voice sank and his thin, lipless mouth opened wide.

"And aren't they surprised . . ." he whispered.

Memories of that "surprise", the terror and the panic and the bloody slaughter, made Jon-Joras wince and shudder. But another memory, at first as small and nagging as a grain of sand under an eyelid, grew and grew and became large. "But a rogue dragon," he said, slowly, "is still only a dragon. It may have learned cunning, but, physically, it is the same. Training hasn't changed the fact that if you put a shot through a certain place, it dies. I pierced that rogue yesterday, myself. At least a hundred shots pierced it . . . the crux of the X mark was obliterated, it was a bloody pulp . . . but the dragon didn't die. *Why not?*"

Hue looked at him, relishing the moment. "Why not? Why, because it's true the dragon's body hadn't changed. But something else was changed. Not *in* the body. *On* the body. We don't take drags that the Gentlemen have already fixed for themselves. Wouldn't be fools if we did. Oh, no. We got our own chick-boys. And we finds our own chicks . . ."

Faintly, faintly, conscious of the cold creeping over him, Jon-Joras saw Aelorix looking at the dragon-cockerel, saw the acid-burned finger of the old marky pointing at the X mark, heard the words, *"Look where he put it, too!"*

"It's only a matter of a few inches," Hue said. "A difference you can't see when you're looking up from below; and all excited with the hunt. Only a few inches, yes, boy. But it might as well be a few miles."

Everything else that Hue told him seemed an anticlimax, though he would have found it exciting enough if he had heard it without the other. There had always been outlaw bands of one sort or another in the forest. But previously, generally, they had been content to remain in the forest. The one now established in the old Karchee castle, however, had no such intentions.

"What do you intend to do about the dragons, if you get into power," Jon-Joras had asked.

"When we get into power? Drags? They shall all be killed, every one of them—in the egg, and out."

"And . . . the Gentlemen?"

"They shall all be killed, every one of them—in the egg, and out."

At first Jon-Joras thought that

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Hue had not fully heard nor understood the second question, was still replying to the first. But then he realized that both of the questions had the same answer.

"And now, Jor-Jonas, or whatever it is you calls yourself—let's *you* answer some questions for me!" Hue's voice was suddenly slickened with a monstrous slyness somehow more disconcerting than a straightforward rage might have been.

"Why . . . of course . . ."

Hue bent down one hairy finger with another. *"First.* What does the Gentlemen want you to find out for 'em? *Second.* What's they paying you? And, *third* . . ." His voice dropped. *"Third.* What made you think you'd live to spend it?"

Nothing so far had been quite so frightening as these three loaded questions in that leering voice. Jon-Joras felt the flesh of his privates crawl. He shrank back from that insanely assured, insanely hating face. Then, at last, he found his voice, heard it quaver. "You think I'm a spy," he said.

Hue smiled—if that spread of mouth and lift of lip could be called a smile.

"But I'm not . . . I'm *not!*"

"Oh . . . ? You're . . . not? You lodged with Aelorix! You hunted with Roedeskant! You were at the Hall of Court in Peramis when the word was 'Guilty'! You were caught slipping through the woods in our direction! And you *still* says that you're no spy?" Abruptly all trace of slyness vanished. "The game is over now! I want answers to my questions, I want 'em honest, I want 'em fast? Does I get 'em? Well, we'll see . . ." He turned to the guard. "Have another set-up," he said. The man with the broken nose nodded and moved away.

There were several huge openings at various points around the pit. Had Jon-Joras not been directed, by Hue's imperative out-thrust arm, he might not have seen the man appear in one of them and put something to his mouth. Even so and at first he did not connect man and motion with what he now heard . . . the deep, lowing note of a cow-dragon.

The beast in the pit had gradually been losing interest in the mangled shreds of the dummy . . . probably its dim and tiny mind had already forgotten what the remnants were. What it heard now, appealed, not to its mind, but to its entire nervous system. It uttered a short cry and turned about, its tongue flicking in and out. In Jon-Joras fear now gave way—partially—to interest . . . and to something else he was not conciously aware of until later. The dragon dropped to its normal stance on all fours and began to amble across the area. Once again the sound came. Jon-Joras saw the man step back into the opening

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and vanish. The dragon moved faster now, but with deliberate speed, until, finally, it entered the gateway and a grill slid into place behind it. Presently the voice of the bull was heard . . . searching . . . puzzled . . . baffled . . . annoyed . . . then it died away.

Interesting; but in no way astonishing. Most woodmen anywhere were able to imitate the calls of some wild creatures and to construct devices which would reproduce the calls of others. The grill had had a make-shift look about it; probably Hue's men had made it. Obviously, though, they had made little else. Certainly they had repaired almost nothing of the ruin time and natural catastrophe had effected. The dragon pit lay below them, with seats about half-way up. Behind them and back a good way loomed the great, black, brooding bulk of the upper part of the castle; and from some probably vast reservoir high above, fractured perhaps in some long-ago earthquake or subsidence of soil, through the huge and displaced dark stones, a torrent of water poured without ceasing. The Kar-chee had arranged the supply, and it still came forth; indeed, it had worn itself a channel across the yard and down the step and perhaps two-thirds of the way around the encircling wall of the pit.

Idly, he watched the water pour out through its crack in the farther wall, abstractedly noted the green of the foliage with the sun shining through it against the black blocks —then his eyes and his attention were jerked suddenly away. The same scene he had witnessed before was now apparantly about to be re-enacted before him. Once again the musics, archers, bannermen took their places. Once again the rows of dummies were set up, the dummy which had been fastened to the stake replaced by another. Another grill was hauled up, another dragon lured out, another mock hunt began.

And all went as before. Hue, seemingly, didn't wish him to forget a single detail of the making of a rogue dragon. And despite the fact that it all aroused in him nothing but horror, fear, and a sick disgust, he watched in fascination as the ritual hunt unfolded itself according to this new and dreadfully different ritual. Again, the horns blared. Again, the archers filled the black-green hide with barbs. Again, the bannermen danced their delicate and dangerous steps. And again the dummy dangled at the stake . . . then, dangled suddenly no more at the stake but up aloft between the dragons teeth.

Something splashed and spattered on Jon-Joras's face and chest. Thoughtlessly, he raised his hand, wiped at it. It was warm. It was, in fact, blood. He looked, incredulous, at the figure which the great

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dragon now held in its talons and tore, screaming, into bits.

And then he vomited.

"That, see," said Hue, turning to him with his horrid grin, "is what happens to spies and to *traitors!*"

The man's voice had started out astonishingly soft and smooth, the face its usual tight-controlled blank; but on the last word the face convulsed, the voice rose into a shriek, cracked upon the last note. The hands leaped up from his sides. Then the face struggled, the mask fell into place again. But the head bobbed towards what was going on in the pit.

"That's what's waiting for you," Hue said, "unless I gets my answers."

Die now or die later, die now or die later, Jon-Joras's mind screamed at him. That was at one level. On another level, details of what he must do appeared to him in white-hot detail. But on all levels he was consumed with an utter loathing of this insane intention to right wrongs at any costs by any means, and which had become an equal wrong in itself. *Die now or*—Six years at the Collegium had prepared him for the moment, six years of then-detested training. He drew back his right arm and with the edge of his right hand he struck Hue a tremendous but still-controlled blow across the throat. He did not wait to watch him fall.

He vaulted over the parapet as he had vaulted so often at the training course and landed on the seats below—which were, of course, no actual seats, but shelving, circling steps. No one was seated there where so long ago the black and mantis-like Kar-chee had crouched to watch no one any longer knew or cared what. The spectacle was far too familiar for those who now occupied the castle. He hoped that no one was watching from the parapet, that the attack had gone unobserved, that no one would in any case venture to jump after him but—assuming he was already or soon to be pursued—would go around to find a proper entrance. He hoped many things, but, mainly, now, he hoped for time.

All those who had been in the pit had jumped into the trenches, he didn't know if the trenches led to any passage-ways below the floor of the pit or if the men simply crouched and waited for a signal that it was safe to come out. Perhaps some might, peering over the brim of a trench—if any ever did—see him now as he sped around the semicircle of seats. But they couldn't know what it was about. They would hardly come up after him just from curiosity. And certainly not with the dragon still in the pit. He rushed along opposite the beast, from whose bloodied throat a dreadful growling came. Evidently it was

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too occupied to observe him. He hoped it would continue so.

The seats shelved around what was roughly the south side of the pit. The water had scored its channel following the northern side . . . or most of it. Jon-Joras sped at an angle down the steps until he came to the last one. Then he jumped into the pit. It seemed, somehow, safer to chance being seen by the dragon than by anyone looking over the parapet above: by running close to the encircling southern side he was for the time being shielded from view of anyone up in the castle proper. But just for the time being . . .

The wall of the seated area seemed to go *on* forever, and still no shouts or calls of alarm came to his ears, although perhaps the pounding of his heart drowned them out. Now the embankment fell away behind him and he darted out into the open, exposing himself to view from above but saving himself time by not hugging the wall of the pit. Then he heard it—the shuddering sound of dragon-hiss. The ear-shattering sound of dragon-scream. The floor of the pit shook with the pounding of dragonfeet. The sound of rushing water was in his ears. He could see again the sun shining through the riven wall, but not the green of trees which only distance had, from above on the parapet before, lent as a seemingly immediate background.

The ground fell away as the wall had fallen away. The dragon roared behind him. The water poured over the brim of the breach. And Jon-Joras jumped.

The whole thing had been a series of gambles from the beginning. He knew when he jumped only that he had won his gamble against the dragon. But for all he knew, the cataract might have dashed against a mass of rocks at its foot. The rocks might have been worn smooth and round, but they would have done for him just as well as if they'd been sharp. It had still been a matter of perhaps dying then rather than later. Only this was certain: he could not have given Hue the answers Hue demanded. It was better to break his neck and back and everything else and die in a matter of seconds than to be played mouse to a dragon's cat.

At first the water had probably have seeped down, merely softening the soil. Afterwards there had probably been a sump, then a swamp created. Eventually, as the volume of escaping water increased, the torrent had eaten out a pool for itself to pour into. The sun and the sky and the black wet walls spun around as he went down. He had tried to make his jump as much of a dive as possible, but he had slipped on the wet brink. The impact of hitting the water drove part of the breath from his lungs and he was not

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able to stay under as long as he wished to. Some measure of panic (if panic could be measured) made him claw at the surface when he arose, and thrash his way to the bank, where he clutched at a low-hanging bush and tried to pull himself up. It gave way and he fell back with the shrub in one hand. Then the current took him and his self-possession returned. He sank as low into the water as he could, holding the shrub so that it shielded—and, he hoped, concealed—his head. He let himself drift.

From time to time Jon-Joras heard dogs barking, but he did not, could not know if this meant pursuit or if they were wild dogs. Once he heard the querilous bleat of an old crone-drag. But mostly there was no sound except the wind and the water. Fear, rather than any particular expectancy, made him keep a sharp glance to shore. When he saw the tiny boat almost concealed in the thicket, he stole it without compunction. It carried him downstream as far a lake and then across the lake. He had some thought of capsizing it and swimming ashore, to persuade pursuers that he had drowned. But there was no sign of pursuit and he decided it would be foolish to leave a trace of his passing so visible from afar. He took it into an inlet and loaded it with stones until it sank.

There had been some small amount of dried food in the boat, and the bushes were heavy with berries of many sorts. He pressed on, having no idea of where he was, and—he realized with surprise—little of even where he wanted to go. The cooling air, lowering sun, and empty landscape seemed to indicate that he had made good his escape. Even so, when he saw the three figures on horseback, his body made an instinctive movement to run. It was quickly checked; the three were not coming from the castle, nor were they dressed like its people. He shouted and waved his hands; they turned towards him, paused, then rode towards him.

One of them was an older man, one was a younger man, and one was a woman. A girl, to be more exact. To be even more exact, the girl who had repulsed his assistance in the mob scene before the Hall of Court . . . the girl whom he had seen and who had fled from him in the woods between the fatal coming of the great rogue dragon and his capture by the outlaw doghunters.

She had said something upon seeing him now and, obviously, recognizing him; something swift and low-voiced to her companions. One of them smiled and the other shrugged, after which she rode apart and said nothing. Jon-Joras was invited to share the older man's mount as they rode on through the long, slow twilight

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over the empty plain, and the three men talked together. But the girl still rode apart, her chin slumped into the blue cloak whose folds enveloped her.

The older man was a swart, stocky, grizzle-beared fellow, his knees stuck out at angles from the sides of his thin gaunt horse. He wore a long cloak of the same blue as the girl, but, cast half aside, it revealed a garb of greasy buckskin beneath. Gold rings glittered in his hairy ears. His male companion was something else altogether—young, slender, upright and trim . . . *elegant* was the word which occurred to Jon-Joras. His tunic was Gentleman's white, his trousers an elaborate embroidered affair (worn, Jon-Joras later learned, on festivals by the nomad tribesmen), and his cloak—arranged with elaborate neatness so as to leave his arms free—was fastened across his chest with a silver chain and clasp. A bracelet of gold chased-work encircled a wrist held out as stiff and proud as if it bore a hawk.

At length the elder cleared his throat and spat. He scratched himself reflectively. "I've been thinking on what you said before, Henners," he observed. "And I can't see that I agree, no, not one bit. There is nothing at all wrong with the triolet."

"Nonsense, Trond," Henners said, vigorously. "It is archaic, contrived, artifical, jejeune—and anything else you like. It altogether lacks the simplicity and directness of the couplet, neither does it lend itself to amplified assonance and alliteration."

Trond screwed his face up into a truely hideous squint, compounded with a frown. "But the couplet—" the last word exploded into an enormous eructation, "—the couplet is so monotonous!"

And so they rode on, as the air turned blue and the sky went purple and the first tiny stars appeared, discussing different modes and metres of poetry; and finally the bright and dancing light of a fire shone before them. And another, and another. Voices haled them, figures rose and crowded around. The girl dismounted, someone took her horse, she vanished from Jon-Joras's sight.

"Fellow poets," said Henners, gesturing, "allow me to present our guest, one Jon-Joras by name, an outworlder and sometime captive of those coarse persons, Hue and his lot. I think we may be of some small assistance to him in the matter of getting him back to a state . . . and I think we will find him not ungenerous, hem, hem, in the matter of expenses. Well! Are we not to eat and drink before falling to the making of new verses and rhymes, the chief end of such portion of mankind as dare deem itself civilized?"

Invitations were at once shout-

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ed, the guest was assisted from his pony and led to a seat by the largest of the fires, where a pair of lambs were grilling on a spit over a bed of coals. Someone thrust a goblet into his hand, of some drink which managed to taste both sweet and acid at the same time; and strong, and smelling of honey.

"First verse!" a voice close to him called. Others took it up. "First verse! Guest! Outworlder! First verse!"

The realization that he was to compose, instanta and impromptu, a short poem, found Jon-Joras with an empty mind. Empty, that is, of everything except the feeling that there was something odd about the lambs which were becoming supper. He held up his hand, the crowd became silent. He spoke.

"Three rode forth, and four returned
When supper grilled and fire burned.
A mystery they found, ere sleep:
Whence came lambs, when there's no sheep?"

The briefest of quiets followed the recitation. Then it was swallowed up in a burst of laughter. Someone pounded him on the back. Someone poured more drink into his golden goblet. And someone on the other side of the fire, whose face he could not distinguish, started a reply.

"Such miracles you find, our guest,
Along with drink and food and rest.
The truth we tell, although it grieves:
The simple fact is—we are thieves!"

VI

Poets there were on MM *beta*, though mostly employing verse forms so involved and elaborate as to make the triolet seem simpler than the couplet. And there were thieves there, too, although even the apprentice ones would scarcely bother with anything as small as a lamb. Poetic thieves, however, or thieving poets—this was something new to Jon-Joras. He suspected it might be something new (or, at any rate, something different) to students of societal set-ups throughout all the teeming galaxy.

And so, there by the leaping flames, he leaned and he listened —amused, amazed, disapproving, entranced—while Henners recited (in couplets, and quatrains) his exploits in removing the jewels and gold and silver plate of His Serene Supremacy the Chairman of the Board of Syndics of Drogue, while the latter sat at meat in his high chamber.

With guests.

He was mildly annoyed at the distraction of having a voice break

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in on the recitation . . . at first. But when the words sank in, he forgot Henners and all his works.

"She's a mean one, that baggage . . . isn't she?"

Jon-Joras, turning his head and seeing Trond, face reddened by the fire light, had somehow no doubt who was meant by "she."

"Who *is* she?" he asked, half-whispering. Trond jerked his head to the left, moved off, and Jon-Joras followed him. Henner's voice was still audible when they stopped at last, but the words could no longer be made out. A fat and gibbous moon rode the cloud-flecked skies and afforded plenty of light to the park-like glade where the thieves' jungle was set up.

"Who is she?' " Trond repeated the question, sat himself on a moss-covered tree trunk lying where it had fallen in some long-ago storm. He did not answer the question, said, instead, "She claims you're following her . . ."

Speechless indignation followed by indignant speech. She claimed that he was following *her*? If the truth was anything at all like that, it was strictly the other way around. He told the older man of finding her in the mob scene in Peramis when the Doghunter had been convicted of killing the Gentleman, of his own attempt to help her and how it had been repulsed—almost rabidly. . . .

"That could have been an accident, our meeting the first time. She couldn't have known I was going to be there, I certainly didn't know she was going to be there. And as for the second time—" Abruptly, he stopped. Did Trond or any of his fellows know about the Kar-chee castle and what was being done there? And, assuming that he and they didn't, did Jon-Joras want them to? Quick reflection decided him that he didn't. He went on, a bit lamely, "—and the second time I was just lost in the woods, I'd gotten separated from the people I was with, and I was picked up by some Doghunters.

"I had no notion she'd be wandering in the same woods. And this last time, I—"

"You just wandered across her path said Trond, nodding, expressionlessly. "Again."

The night was warm, but the young man felt his face go warm. "It may sound like an unlikely coincidence," he said, defensively; "but you have to remember that I'm an outworlder . . . a stranger . . . And besides—how could I have known that she—and you—would be riding along at just that time?"

"Well," said Trond, on a prolonged note. "I'm just telling you what she says. I could think of a lot of ways it might be true . . . if I was minded to . . . but I'm not. Why not? Because. Like I

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say. She's a mean one, that baggage. As the triolet says—"

But Jon-Joras did not at that moment want to know what the triolet said. He grasped Trond's knee, and repeated, "Who is she? *Who?*"

"Her name," Trond said, "is Lora."

Lora. "No . . . It doesn't mean a thing to—"

"Maybe her boss's name might mean a thing to you."

"Her boss?"

Trond nodded. His pipe made a gurgling sound. "Yes. Tall, thin, *ukh*-looking man. Name of Hue."

Away in the night Henner's voice ceased. There were cheers and applause. Jon-Joras, feeling stunned, feeling stupid, said, "But why should *she* hate me? Her boss does, I know, but—"

Trond made a noise which might have been a grunt or a chuckle. "Don't fool yourself. Why *shouldn't* she hate you? You're an outworlder, aren't you? Well, figure it out. According to him, according to her, if you—all of you—didn't come here to hunt, the whole system would collapse. It doesn't pay for itself, that's for sure. Hate you? It'd be damned odd if she didn't."

In his mind's eye Jon-Joras saw once again that grim, gaunt figure, preternaturally rigid, stalking the halls and walls and ramparts of the great black Karchee castle; heard the screams of the rogue dragon in the pit, trained by torment—dragons: Hue's enemy: prepared to fall upon Hue's other enemy. Once again he saw the figure of the dummy that was no dummy, trussed and tied, then tossed and toothed and torn to bleeding fragments; heard the outlaw's outraged cry, "That . . . is what happens to spies and *traitors!*"

"They mustn't take me," he muttered, his voice uneven. "Not again. Not again."

Trond pursued his wide mouth, waved his hand. "Not much danger of that," he said. "You're worth more to us by getting you back to one of the states. Provided, of course," he raised his eyebrows; "provided, of course, you meant what you said. About our, uh, expenses. . . ?"

Jon-Joras assured him that, of course, he meant it. "Jetro Yi, the Hunt Company representative, has an ample fund sufficient to repay you. Generously."

The other man rose, stretched. "That's all right, then," he said, yawning. "We'll get you back, all right.—Oh—" A sudden thought seemed to occur to him. He put a hand on Jon-Jora's shoulder, leaned close.

"You know one of ours, by the name of Thorm? Kind of a bandy-legged fellow with bulging blue eyes and his verses don't scan? No? Well . . . Anyway . . .

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Watch out for him. Kind of carefully. Let's be getting back to the fire, it's growing cold."

The moon continued to wander up the sky and a light mist was settling in the glade. The effect was luminous and ghostly.

"Thorm," Jon-Joras repeated. "Why should I—I don't know him at all. Does he know me?"

"No," said Trond. "But he knows Lora."

Jon-Jora recognized Thorm at once when, as soon as they got back to the fire, the man stepped forward, gave him an ugly look, spat on the ground, then stooped, dug up the clot of earth with the spittle on it, and flung it into his face.

"Well, *well,*" said Henners, in a tone of pleasant surprise. "This *is* an honor, young our guest. You may neither realize nor appreciate it, but it is truly very seldom that we accord the dignity of challenged combat and all that it implies, to those not of our own select group. And certainly not as soon as this. Some might be inclined to disallow it . . . Eh?" He looked around in a politely questioning manner.

Trond said, "It's not customary. It's what you might call an innovation."

There was a murmur of approbation. "Like free verse," someone added, disapprovingly. But another voice said, "I wouldn't be inclined to quibble. The guest's poesies were really quite acceptable, I thought, from a non-poet—wouldn't you agree? Voice vote! Voice vote!'

And the *Gos* outnumbered the *Nos.*

"Very well," Henners said, equitably. "It's *go,* then—Oh, if the guest accepts. Do you?" he asked. "Do you choose to accept the challenge and all that it implies?"

Jon-Joras felt that he would much rather not; much, much rather not. But he felt unable to say so. And he asked what other choice he had, instead.

Henners cleared his throat, frowned slightly. "I, well, really, the other choice is so very unpleasant, I would really rather not go into it. My word as a rhymer: Accept the challenge. Eh?"

And Jon-Joras nodded. And a cheer went up.

A space was cleared, two wicked looking knives produced, one given to Thorm and one to Jon-Joras. There were ritual preliminaries, but he did not hear them. A chill was on his heart, and with all his chill heart he cursed the world of his race's birth and all its bloody ways. Knives! Duels! Combats! What did he know of such things? On his own home world nothing more dangerous than wrestling—

And, *"Go!"* cried a hundred throats.

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Thorm came forward in a sort of dancing crouch that instantly put Jon-Joras in mind of a stance quite popular at the Collegium; finding that the knife in his hand not only felt unfamiliar but was likely to impede him, he thrust it between his teeth, and then, almost automatically, without a second's hesitation, leapt forward, grasped Thorm by the right ankle, and pulled him off his feet.

A cry of delight went up from the crowd, including one man who was casually whittling the end of a long stick.

Thorm fell, Jon-Joras released the ankle and reached for the shoulders. But Thorm, whose knife was not between his teeth, slashed at him; Jon-Joras swerved, missed the shoulders, felt the knife tear his side. At the moment what he felt was not pain, but a sort of sick surprise.

They broke and parted. Jon-Joras had achieved the first fall, but Thorm, the first blood; and as they were engaged, not in a wrestling match but a duel to the death, progress so far was definitely his. One thing was clear: Jon-Joras must henceforth concentrate, not on his opponent's shoulders, but on the wrist of the hand holding the knife.

What followed was a nightmare. The thud of body against body, the smell of sweat, the fear, the trembling, the scramble towards safety, the eye ever on the bloody knife . . .

. . . the bloody knife which once more, then twice more, then a third time more, grew bloodier yet from his own torn flesh.

It happened thus: Thorm had left himself open and Jon-Joras jumped him, had—almost—his fingers upon the wrist of the knife hand, felt his foot turn upon a pebble, swerved without meaning to or being able to prevent it, was seized by Thorm and carried backward, downward, backward—Then he partly righted himself, did, indeed, grasp the dangerous wrist. And so they found themselves, half-crouching, half-kneeling, unable to move one the other. But it was Jon-Joras, held fast by Thorm's arms and legs, whose back was to the fire. And his back was very close to the fire, and soon the smell of his singed tunic came to his nostrils, and after that began the pain. Pain unbearable.

He did not later remember doing what he knew he must have done. All he remembered was, suddenly, in the sudden silence, seeing—over Thorm's shoulder—the handle of the knife buried in Thorm's back. Thorm never said a word nor made a sound as he slumped, sagged, sank with all his weight into Jon-Joras's arms. Who, his back seeming all afire, screamed, gave a mighty thrust forward, felt himself staggering backward—

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—and was grasped by many willing hands and pulled away. His smoking tunic was torn from his bleeding body. Voices cried, *"Take! Take!"* He stared at them, stupidly.

"Take what?" he asked.

For answer, someone seized the knife from Thorm's hand (the body lay where it had fallen, on its back, the prominent blue eyes staring at the starry sky, mouth open on a note of unutterable surprise), someone ripped open tunic and pulled up shirt, someone parted the pale skin of the chest with the knife, reached in, twisted, tugged, hand emerging with something dark-red and dripping. It was in an instant skewered on a long stick and someone handed the stick to Jon-Joras.

He grasped hold of it automatically and uncomprehendingly. "What . . . what do I do with it?" he asked.

There was a *huh?* of astonishment; then the man who had whittled the sharp end to the stick, this man said, "Do with it? Why, what else *would* you do with your enemy's heart—except grill it and eat it?"

Body shuddering, face twitching, Jon-Joras held it at arm's length, as far away as he could, straining to be quit of it. But it didn't vanish, it stayed where it was, and it dripped. "No . . ." he said. "No . . . No . . . I can't . . ."

"You *can't?* But—why *not?*"

Neither could he vanish himself. He forced himself to answer. "It. Is. Against. My custom."

At length the puzzled silence was broken by Henners. He took the stick with the pierced heart out of Jon-Jora's clenched, stained hand. "Well, if you can't, you can't," he said. "Of course, one must keep one's custom. But . . . Still . . . Well, all I have to say is, in that case, you've wasted a damned good man."

VII

They rendezvoused the following night with the tribe called rivermen, or boaters, and made their arrangements with the ruddy, bandylegged little fellows. All the dark of moonlit hours were spent on the water; as soon as the misty, pearl-grey dawn broke, the shallow craft was taken up an inlet, beached, covered with branches. Then they slept.

When they were next all awake the boaters had speared fish and proceeded now to cook it. Trond scratched, Henners carefully made his toilet, the rivermen pretended to count their paddles lest the poets had stolen one of them . . . so, easily, the hours passed till dark came again and the voyage was resumed. Jon-Joras knew now what the plan was and what was expected of him: a landing

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near the thickets by the shallows of northern Peramis, a riverman to go with message to Jetro Yi, the Company man to come with the money to pay the "expenses", and a point of honor to say nothing till time enough had passed for the guides (and guards) to be safely all away.

This was well enough with Jon-Joras. He felt slightly feverish, rather light of body and mind, day and night passed like gentle and unimportant dreams . . . in the background there were hints of hideous things . . . but only hints . . . and only in the background . . .

He was not quite sure how many of these days and nights there were (though surely not many). There was the hot smell of the grass and the resinous scent of the evergreen boughs, Trond and Henner now talking of Lora's attempts to urge the Poets into counter-action against the nomad tribesmen, now reciting to each other old verses or new or once again comparing couplets and quatrains and sonnets and triolets; the ruddy little rivermen squinting at them and him goodnaturedly and not understanding or caring about a word of it. There was the river at night, throbbing with its own great pulse in the incredibly yellow moonlight, golden buttery reflections rippling and melting and coalescing; and on a night like that a wedge of boats advanced towards them from downstream and another had spread out behind them from up stream, and—

"Yield! *Yield!*" cried voices all around, Trond swore, Henners wordlessly slipped from his clothes and was pale as moonlight as he dove into the stream, the boaters pulled their vessel around and darted for the nigher shore, but then a bow twanged and one of the watermen cried out and caught at the shaft in his shoulder.

"That was just for formality," said a voice from the now hostile night. "We have guns, too. *Yield!*"

And added, for further formality, "—in the name of His Serene Supremacy, the Chairman of Drogue, who keeps the peace of The River."

"We yield," said Trond, sullenly. And the dark, swift craft were all about them.

"Go forward, boaters," the voice directed. Two of the three played their paddles in silence, a silence broken by occasional calls from those guard-boats who had gone in search of Henners . . . evidently without success, for they by and by rejoined the formation.

They landed at a wharf bright with lamplight, and Jon-Joras, finally and completely emerged from the doze or daze which engaged him through most of the trip, now observed the men who were surrounding them—after having emerged with precision

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from the flotilla. Challenges were evidently not the only things done with formality in Drogue; its armed force, in form-fitting black with adornments of crimson and gold, made a considerable contrast to that of Peramis, which was clad in loose green-drab.

"You are now under charge of arrest," said a tall and grim-faced officer. "My report will note that you yielded on the second challenge." He asked and received their names, proceeded: "The man Henners—who has succeeded in in evading us for now—was indicted in absentia for grand robbery, *lese majeste,* and sedition of conduct. *You,* the man Trond—"

"I can produce a hundred witnesses that I was nowhere near Drogue when Henners—"

"—by your presence with the man Henners tonight, have become guilty of conserting with criminals."

Trond shrugged. "The outworlder has nothing to do with all that," he said. "He was lost and we were guiding him back down to Peramis—that's all."

As if Trond had not spoken, the officer continued, "*You,* the man Jon-Joras, by your presence with the man Trond, have become guilty of consorting with criminals."

Aghast Jon-Joras cried, "But how far can you carry that?"

The officer, who had turned away with a gesture, now half-turned his head. "Infection never ceases," he said. And continued on his way. Even before he had spoken, the black-clad river troops had closed in on Trond and Jon-Joras, bound their arms at wrists and elbows. No sooner had he spoken his last sibilant and turned his head away, than the two prisoners were led off at a fast half-march, half-trot that left no moment for anything but compliance.

The boaters had not been mentioned in the charges of arrest, had stood by with mournful faces and drooping heads, as if they knew what was coming. What came was a brusque grunt of a command from a petty officer. A pair of axes glinted, raised in the air. The rivermen broke out into a wail. The stove boat burned slowly. But it burned.

"What's ye got, Blue?" one of the turnkeys asked.

"Candidates for Archie," was the guard's curious answer.

Finally, the last thick and barred door behind them, the guard in charge rasped a metal-tipped rod against a great reticulation of a grill-work gate.

And then, impatient, seized hold of a rope and began to toll a brass-voiced bell. And at least a hundred human voices broke into a clamor.

Dim and tiny lights burned overhead at intervals in the vast

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room, filthy rushes scattered underfoot, and from heaps of these reeds prisoners were still rising as the two new ones were let in through a narrow door in the great grill.

"Fresh meat!"

"New blood!"

"Who's them?"

"What's ye charges?"

The warder, roused from a little wooden room like a dog-kennel, cursed ineffectually, produced (after some search) a grubby and grimy little tattered book, signed in his new charges with his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth. By the time he was done the other troopers were gone and many of the prisoners had returned to their sleep. Others, however, still crowded around and still put their questions.

The place—it was not so much a room or a hall or keep as simply a large leftover space inside the building—the place stank abominably, and many of those now thrusting forward their eager, open mouths, stank worse.

Trond, wincing, shoved them away—not gently. He peered through the rancid gloom, demanded, "Where's the Poets' Corner? Any poet here?"

The crowd muttered, milled around a bit, parted, finally, for a tall and thin and stooped old man who came blinking forward to be identified by Trond before he had focussed his own blear old eyes.

"Serm. Still here, poor ancient?"

"Still here . . . Who's that? Trond; don't tell me; it's Trond. Well . . . I don't know this young sprig. Give me a rhyme, my sib, with your name in acrostic."

But Jon-Joras, depressed, made no answer, followed them to a corner by a narrow, slitted window, with its own lamp, and—actually—a cleaner heap or rushes than were elsewhere, a crude table, rickety chair, jug of water, and a very worn blue riding cloak. Only the three of them shared the area. "This is what's called 'Poets' Corner,'" Trond said, with a gesture and a quirk of his mouth. "It don't look like much—but compare it to the rest of this rat-trap: it's palatial. And it's ours by right of tradition."

Old Serm nodded. "Used to be a flower in a pot and a little bird in a cage. Died, both of them." He drew in his breath with a gusty noise.

"Sure, living and dying
Is sorrow and sighing—"

With an abrupt change of manner, he said, "Young outworlder, tomorrow you must see the Chairman. Insist on it. Do you hear? Insist on it!" Then, with groans and creaks, he settled down on his heap of reeds, took a corner of the cloak, and invited the two other occupants of Poets' Corner to share the rest between them.

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Jon-Joras, when the sun had finally penetrated to the prison-room, did insist on it.

"Want to see The Man With The Hairy Nose, do y'?" asked the warder, with a small smile. Long years of constant communication with criminals had given him a complete command of their argot.

"I am informed that it's my right to petition the Puissant Chair for attention to grievance," said Jon-Joras.

The warder grunted, scratched his naval. "Your right, hey?"

"And I insist upon it."

Yawn. Stretch. Scratch again. The warder craned his neck to watch the progress of a nearbye dice game. "Well . . ." after a long moment, "I'll pass the word along, sib. I'll pass the word along . . ."

And so, eventually, the word was passed back.

"You, there. Archie-bait," said the warder one afternoon. "Strip down and wash your crummy rags and ribs. I'll open the water-room for y', there's wood for fire and pots to boil the fleas in."

"Good!" said Jon-Joras, peeling off his clothes and taking the little shovel of embers from the man. And—"What? Soap? Why—"

"Mustn't smell bad when you're up before The Man."

When at last he was clean and his clothes were dry, Jon-Joras followed the guards who held his tether out into the starlit, sweet-smelling night. A pony-wagon was waiting, its sides enveloped in black curtains. They did not bother to explain or apologize for binding his feet and gagging him. The conclusion came to Jon-Joras, not for the first time, that the exercise of civil rights in the City-State of Drogue left a good deal to be desired.

Facing them at the other end of the long hall was The Chair itself—so far, an unoccupied piece of furniture. It was, however, the most elaborate piece of furniture he had seen anywhere at anytime: high, enormous, carved profusely, polished, gilded, cushioned in velvet and damask. He thought of the noisome and verminous rushes on the hard, stinking, sodden odor of the prison room. A bitter taste was in his mouth.

The guards jerked him to a stop, removed his gag. He, familiar, after all, with the intensely sophisticated court of King Por-Paulo, watched with the interested eye of a connoisseur the ceremonies which accompanied the entrance of His Serene Supremacy, the Chairman, as the latter took his seat on The Chair. Roelorix III was a swift and slender man in his late thirties; tucking his purple-slippered feet under him, he made slight movements of head and hand. The guards nudged Jon-Joras.

Who identified himself as a Private Man of his king, stated his

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reason for being here on Prime World . . . "Earth," he corrected himself . . . and went on to say, "I address The Puissant Chair for attention to grievances."

The Puissant Chair, looking a little weary, a little cynical, invited him—by the smallest change of expression, to continue his address. He explained his being present at the impromptu dragon hunt, described that melancholy scene. The Chairman at once became intent, and more and more so as Jon-Joras proceeded with his description of the Kar-chee Castle and what went on therein.

Indeed, he spoke freely of everything . . . omitting only the matter of his duel to the death with Thorm. It did not seem to him to be pertinent, and, besides, he could not bring himself to dwell upon those still horrifying memories.

"The two men of the people called Poets agreed to guide me back to Peramis," he said, concluding, "and therefore I went with them."

"And therefore," said the Chairman, speaking for the first time; "and therefore you travelled at night and concealed yourself during the day."

"I . . . I never considered the implications of that," Jon-Joras stammered. It was true; he never had. "It was night when we decided to leave, and it seemed natural to rest during the day . . . Conceal? I didn't . . . I suppose I took it for granted that it was the local customary way—"

The Chairman, in a moment so swift—yet completely unhurried—that Jon-Joras scarcely observed the details of it, rose to his feet. Pointing his finger at Jon-Joras, he said, in a clear, quick voice, "You lie. You have consorted not only with thieves but with outlaws, and with rebels—the worst, the most dangerous kind of outlaws—at that. You have condemned yourself by the imprecations of your own mouth, and this is the verdict which we have reached in Our capacity as Chief Magistrate: that a time to be decided upon you be taken to a place to be decided upon and there bound hand and foot and hanged by the heels and shot to death by archery."

Dumbfounded, and too incredulous to feel either anger or fear, Jon-Joras watched the Chairman walk out with quick, concise strides. He barely felt the gag forced back into his mouth. And then the guards led him away.

Trond winced, grunted, shook his head. Serm was remourceful, full of self-reproach. "I should never have put that notion in your ear," he moaned, "about asking to see the Nose. Who'd have thought it? It passes understanding—doesn't it, Trond? *Never* heard of such a thing—arching an outworlder! Did you, Trond?"

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"No! And I'm not going to hear about it now, either," Trond said, vigorously. "Don't you let your cullions crawl, young fellow—this is a time for desperate measures, and I'm going to take them, too!"

The warder looked at them, as they approached, with melancholy satisfaction. "Sometimes, don't pay to insist," he observed.

Trond shrugged. "Well, like I tell him, no one lives forever, anyway. Right?"

"Right."

"'Don't wiggle,' I tell him; 'hang still, give the archies a clear target, soon be over.' Right?"

"That's what *I* always tell 'em. Right."

"So, what we want to do, we want to give him a big good-bye party—drinks, eats—the works —"

The warder slowly drooped his right eyelid and his lower lip in understanding and assent. Then he rubbed a thumb and a forefinger together. Trond slipped a ring from off one of his own fingers, placed it in his palm. Instantly, the warder said, "That bandy won't bring much." But he didn't stop looking at it. A glint of light reflected in his eye. He didn't stop looking at it.

"It'll bring enough. What do you says, Wards? Sell it and keep half for yourself and buy booze and bites with the rest."

He held out the palm. The warder took it with restrained eagerness, sighed with hypocritical regret. "Too bad . . . too bad . . . a nice ring . . . a nice fellow . . . Sure. Sure. Glad to do what I can. *Glad* to. Never mind *my* cut. I won't take a thing. Depend on me. I'll see you get what you need."

The ring vanished into a pocket inside his greasy old shirt. Trond thanked him, led Jon-Joras away. "There's a rogue, if you like," he muttered. "'Won't take a thing'! He won't take more than two thirds of it, is what he means."

Only now did the fear of death enter the younger man's heart. He felt it chill and swell. "Listen," he said, uncertainly, "I don't want to have any parties, I want to—"

"Want to get out. Right." Trond took his hand and patted it. "Have no fear, friend. Wards can't dispose of that bandy in any regular jewels shop. One look at him, they'd call the guards. No . . . Only a fence will buy it from him, and there's only one fence in Drogue that handles bandies of that value: Old Boke: Old Boke will have the whole story out of him before he pays him a penny.

"*And*—" he gave Jon-Joras's cold and sweating hand a final pat-pat, "Old Boke will pass the word along where it will do the most good. The Poets have their friends in town. Have no fear, I tell you again. And sleep light to-

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night. You listening? *Sleep light . . .*"

In fact, of course, Jon-Joras didn't sleep at all. As, one by one, the scant oils in the tiny slut-lamps of the prison room were used up and the smoldering wicks vanished into winking red little eyes in the darkness and then were gone, he sank into a kind of feverish phantasmagoria. He felt ill and dizzy; the vertigo helped persuade him that he could feel what it was like to be upside down; the ankle bands on his shoes became the bonds fastening his feet; and every rough rush penetrating his loosened clothes became the shaft of an arrow penetrating his frightened flesh.

Then, suddenly, the illusion changed. All, all had been a dream: the escape from the Kar-chee castle, the duel with Thorm, the long trip down the great river, capture and imprisonment: all a dream. He was still in the Kar-chee castle and none of the rest had happened. But—and this he knew with frightening and absolute certainty—it was all *going* to happen, every bit and detail of it. And he could not prevent it, it had already begun, and the proof of this was that once again he smelled the smoke of burning torches.

With a stifled groan and a sigh, chiefly of relief—for even the uncertainty of life with Hue was better than lying under sentence of death—he raised his head in order to see the light of the flambeaux he was sure he smelled. He wondered, as he did so, if he must follow the predestined pattern of events indeed . . . or if there were some possibility of escape. And then his mind became suddenly as wide-awake as his body.

There was a curious scuffling sound faintly over his head. A change in the rhythm of their breathing told him that both Trond and Serm were also now aware of something unusual going on. They rose cautiously in the darkness without speaking. Someone took Jon-Joras's arm, felt along it to the hand, guided the hand, unresisting, through the darkness. He felt rope . . . a stick of wood . . . more rope. Trond—it must be Trond, those sturdy arms—pushed him upwards. He seized hold of the rope ladder and began to climb.

The door from which the ladder depended had probably once been intended to open onto a corridor in an upper floor which had never been built. For uncounted years it had opened onto nothingness, onto air—except, of course, that it had never been opened at all. Along with the rest of the wall the door had once been whitewashed, along with the rest of the wall it had long since been covered with dust and dirt and soot.

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The torch which he had smelled burned at the end of the corridor above. At first he did not know any of the faces belonging to those who held the other end of the rope ladder. Gradually, in the darkness, as, first Serm, then Trond, mounted to join him, his eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light. And when one face turned, having carefully seen to the careful closing of the door behind it, he recognized it at once.

Henners!

Even in a darkness dispelled only by the sullen glare of the single torch the halls and rooms through which they now soon passed had the naked and unresisting look of things long concealed. The bricked-up windows gazed blindly, sagging and dust-covered shards of furniture lay in limp tangles all about. Once, Jon-Joras stepped on the dry bones of a rat, and they crunched and snapped. He shuddered, pressed on ahead.

At length they left narrow confines behind them and came to a wide hold emptying on one side down a broad cascade of steps into a vast pool of darkness. Following a gesture by Henners, all advanced to the carven balustrade, paused to extinguish the torch by a method as primitive as it was effectual (and easier on bare feet than stamping). Then, in utter blackness, felt their way down the broad steps, each holding onto the shoulder of the man in front in a sort of shuffling lock-step.

The stairs seemed endless, and the floor they finally led onto, even more; and here and hereafter they hugged a wall. Once, by sudden, unspoken and common consent, they stopped and held their breaths. Far, far off, someone crossed at right angles to their own path, a slut-lamp held unsteadily in hand, and either moaned or sang . . . something . . . in an inhuman, crooning sort of voice which froze Jon-Joras's blood. Voice and light and sound died away at last. They moved on.

They moved on.

After endless black years (and the ground grew rough, and the ground grew damp) he saw, like a fabled wanderer ages uncountable before him, overhead, the beauteous stars.

VIII

Jetro Yi's effusive and almost incredulous pleasure at seeing Jon-Joras return soon vanished on hearing what he had to say.

"Then it's true? It *is* true! We've heard rumors, we were naturally, P.M., you understand, we were unwilling to credit them. But—Oh, that's horrible! That's unbelievable! Marking dragons in the wrong place—oh, my life! But . . . I mean . . . actually

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training them to become rogues! That's worse than anything I could imagine!"

His rubbery features were distended, distorted by shock. He took him to his superior, the Hunt Company's Chief Agent in Peramis, one Wills H'vor. H'vor was a man of full flesh, he began to tremble, then to shake. Before Jon-Joras was quite finished, the Chief Agent's heavy face and pendulous cheeks, the slack muscles of his arms revealed by the sleeveless shirt, were wobbling and quivering. His teeth clattered. With a convulsive movement, he steadied himself enough to speak.

"We—we-we-we—we might have all been *killed!*" he burst out. Clearly, no conceivable detail of that dreadful death was escaping his imagination. "How can we be-be-be *sure?*" he cried.

"Whether the dragons are honestly marked or not? And rogues or not? You can't," Jon-Joras said. "I suppose that's part of their purpose, the outlaw Doghunters, that is." He felt no desire, now, to go into the morals of the matter, to blame the raging hatred of the outlaws any more than the cold, indifferent oppression of the Gentlemen. His injured arm was giving him infinite pain, he felt sick and hungry and weak.

"Please get me ConfedBase on the communicator," he said. "And then . . . then . . . I think I'd better see a physician . . ."

Wills H'vor waved a trembling fat flipper of a hand. Jetro Yi's instinctive and obsequious reaction lacked much of its usual fulsomeness, but he hastened to comply. Voices came and went behind the blind face of the comspeaker, Jon-Joras wearied of repeating himself over and over again only to be switched on to someone higher up —and then having to begin yet again. Finally—

"Delegate Anse on. *Who* is this?"

It might have been imagination, but it seemed to Jon-Joras that on his mentioning (for the tenth time, perhaps) the phrase, ". . . Private Man of King Por-Paulo of M.M. *beta* . . ." he heard the voice of the Galactic Delegate undergo a clear but subtle change. But he did not pause to question this, went on with what he had to say. He stumbled, repeated himself, but he kept on talking.

"All right . . . No more for just now," Anse's voice instructed, interrupting him. "We'll finish this up together. When. Mmmm. See . . . Today is Thirday . . . You missed the ferry, won't be another till next Firsday. I can't take the time off just now, or I'd come up by special. Should I send a special to bring you here?"

It was decided, finally, that Jon-Joras should rest, under medical care, until the regular weekly ferry trip the following Firsday.

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There were special facilities at the Lodge; he should take advantage of them.

"Meanwhile," concluded Delegate Anse, "this information had best remain uncirculated. Does anyone else . . . Companymen Yi and H'vor? I'll get on to them. And you, P.M., take it soothly. Heal well."

Under the ministrations of Physician Tu, graduate therapist of the famous schools of Planet Maimon, Jon-Joras's injuries soon ceased to vex him. In his quiet room at the far end of one wing of the Lodge, he lay on his couch looking out the transparent wall. Dark and green rose the wooded hills afar off the great river flowing silvery as it bent in the middle distance. Dimly, like a picture scroll slowly unwinding, images, images passed before his eyes.

The hall at Aelorix . . . the young archers at practice . . . the singing passengers flying to the impromptu dragon hunt . . . the incredible moments while the great bull-dragon failed to be diverted . . . the stumbling through the forest . . . barking dogs . . . musty tunnel . . . Kar-chee castle . . . training the rogue . . . blood spattering . . . the long fall into the water . . . the heat of the fire and Thorm straining to place his knife . . . gliding down the broad moonlit river . . . the stinking prison room, the cold, impassive face of the Drogue Chairman.

But gradually these images faded and were gone, were replaced by others: the central lawn at the Collegium, like blue-green velvet . . . a crowd of boys taunting one of their number, black-haired and white-faced and defiant . . .

Then, slowly, slowly, this too vanished. He continued to lie on his couch, and the afternoon sank beneath the weight of night. The great red sun hesitated on the horizon.

As he lay back after the supper tray was gone, Jon-Jaras had a definite impression that he was loosing consciousness. It was not with the suddenness of shock nor the slower procession of a faint, but he was (slowly, slowly) fading away from the world of the senses.

The opaque wall showed a dim forest scene. If he looked carefully, he thought, he might see what was lurking behind the trees, before the scene ebbed away. *I will grasp the rail of this bed,* he thought, *with all my might, and hold on tightly, tightly; if I find my hands anywhere else I will know that I've been unconscious . . .*

It seemed, somehow, important that he should know. And so, he did know, when he found his hands clasped on the coverlet, that he had slipped away. It must have

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been then that the man had entered his room, and led him, unresisting, away.

"Doghunter," Jon-Joras murmured. "Doghunter." But he was wrong.

"I should have killed you when you were on my own grounds," Aelorix said. "And buried you beneath the dung of the deer-barn." His mouth arched like a bow, down at the corners.

Feeling dazed, dull, stupid, Jon-Joras said, "But I saw your son die. He died in my arms. He—"

"He died, at least, with honor. Sooner or later, one way or the other, every man meets his dragon. *His* was a dirty one—a rogue. A man-made rogue!" The aristocrat's voice clicked in his throat, his face showed a disgust greater even than grief or rage.

Protesting, bewildered, "But I had nothing to do with that," Jon-Joras cried. "I might have been killed there myself. I don't understand. I don't understand!" His anguished gaze took in the rough-looking man who had brought him there and his rougher-looking fellows. "And I certainly don't—You! You are not of the Gentlemen! Why are you doing this?"

The guide gave a short laugh. "Ah, you thought you was so clever, huh. 'Doghunter,' you said to me. That's just one of your mistakes. I'm not a Doghunter, huh, anymore than I'm a Gentleman. Maybe you don't know everything about this place after all. So I'll tell a few things, make it all clear. What's it that the old nut-head who digs in ruins calls us? 'Plebs'? So we're plebs, huh. *But that don't make us Doghunters!* Or what's it they like to call themselves, 'free farmers,' we don't want no farms, dig potatoes, all that. Nah . . ."

In small mood to appreciate the rude logic of what he heard, Jon-Joras listened nevertheless. It did make sense. Many of the plebs gave full approval to the Hunt system. They did so because of the employment it gave, the trade it brought, the color it afforded their otherwise drab days; they did so from simple habit, too, and also because they held themselves to be superior to the Doghunters—who opposed it. And because it allied them, thus, to the Gentlemen, whom they envied—and with whom, thus, they identified.

It was that complex. And that simple.

In vain Jon-Joras pointed out that to expose the outlaws' program of mis-marking dragon-chicks and of training some of those thus disfigured to be rogues, must inevitably result—one way or another—in the destruction of the outlaws' program. Uselessly he declared that he himself was taking no sides, that Hue's people had captured him once and subsequently tried to have him murdered.

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To the first plea Aelorix said only, grimly, "We know how to take care of that ourselves." And to the second, "Too bad they didn't succeed." Adding, "But *we* will . . ."

Why? *Why?*

But the questions were based on the assumption that reason and fair-play prevailed, and in this situation neither did. The outlaws now wished their outlawry revealed and Jon-Joras had agreed to reveal it. Therefore he was doing their bidding. Therefore he was on their side. Therefore he had made himself the target of the full rage of the Gentlemen and their jackals.

More—When Aelorix had said, so long ago, that he was not dependent on the Hunt Company, he spoke only in the most economic, limited sense. Every single Gentleman was dependent on the Company because the Hunt System was dependent on the outworld trade and the Gentlemen, as a class, were dependent on the System. Even such finite freedom as Aelorix himself possessed was the exception.

"Do you think I don't know you for what you are?" he asked, scornfully. "Outworlders?—cowards—the lot of you. One hint of danger, you'd never show yourselves on Earth again. And then what? Grub in the dirt—*us*?"

Then, as he paused, over the sound of his heavy breathing, another sound came in from the night . . . low. Low, troubled, melancholy . . . the cry of a questing dragon. Almost for the first time there came to Jon-Joras's mind, pre-occupied as it was with his own fears and his troubles, some thought of dragon *qua* dragon—poor beast! predestined to torture, agony, death for another species' sport—when all it wanted was to find a mate, to couple as nature intended it, off there in the cool and ferny darkness.

The eyes of master and men swung in the direction of the cry, then; rested briefly, swung back to the prisoner; met each other. Whatever thoughts were theirs, pity was not one of them. The erstwhile guide began to grin.

"There it is," he said.

Aelorix nodded. Jon-Joras felt his flesh prickle. "What—" he began.

" 'Sooner or later,' " Aelorix quoted himself, " 'one way or the other, every man meets his dragon.' "

"Hear it? That's yours."

IX

Aelorix's final words to his prisoner and former guest were never finished, but did not need to be. "What's the reason *you* should live, and *he* be dead—" the man said; his face twisted with grief and haste and he turned away. It was the age-old cry of *Why me*

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and not another? and in his bitterness and his rage, fed from a hundred springs, somehow he blamed Jon-Joras for his own son's death.

It was the time between dawn and earliest morning. Mostly the sky was grey, but the mist to eastwards had begun to show pink. All was quiet, all was cool, as they took him from the small house in the woods. The Gentleman himself said nothing more after that, but his lowborn thugs cursed and muttered and hawked and spat and complained of the chill. Dew still trickled and fell upon them, going down the barely visible path.

"Give it a blow, Big?" one of the men asked. Aelorix nodded. The man fumbled in a kit by his side, took out a small bottle, swore, put it back, fumbled again, this time came up with something made of wood and bark, put it to his lips. His cheeks inflated. Had Jon-Joras not been watching he would never have believed that what he now heard came from anything but the mouth of a dragon.

The soft sad notes faded away on the dim air. All listened, all were still. For a while, nothing. Then, from off to the right and a distance (to Jon-Joras, incalculable) came what almost seemed a deeper echo of the same cry. The men nodded.

"That's him," they said. "Hasn't moved much in the night." The man behind him poked Jon-Joras. "Get flapping," he instructed.

They came by and by to an end of the woods and entered onto a wide and flat park-like place covered with waist-high grass and here and there a low tree. Again they sounded the dragon-call, and again and again. And the dragon responded and the voice of the real dragon came nearer.

Halfway across the great clearing all stopped. "As far as we go," one of the thugs said. He gave Jon-Joras one last, painful prod in the kidneys with the squat muzzle of the huntgun. "You better not move away from right here," he warned, "until the drag comes in. You *do*, and—" He imitated the sound of the capsule being fired.

"*After* the drag comes in, why, you can move all you like. Maybe —if you're lucky—if you move fast enough . . ." He shrugged.

Jon-Joras half-turned, watched them walking back at a brisk pace in the direction they'd come from. Then he swung back to watch the woods ahead of him. His legs twitched, but he beat down the impulse to flee. After a long while, or so it seemed, the cow-call came again from behind him, was answered by the bull in the forest ahead.

A tree moved in the wind that blew from the west, from behind, then another. His heart swelled and his head snapped as he saw that the second moving thing was

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no tree. The long neck swung from side to side, the faceted eyes gleamed yellow and green. And then the body moved out into the open. The great mouth parted, sounded its immemorial question.

And then the utterly unexpected happened. A dragon call from behind . . . but not the submissive one of a cow-dragon as before. This was a bull, another bull, a defiant and challenging bull; instantly, along with it, came the strong and bitter reek of bull-scent. Jon-Joras felt his bowels turn. Trapped! Before and behind him! Trapped—

The visible dragon bellowed its vexation. And Jon-Joras saw it all.

There was no bull-dragon behind him, just as there was no cow-dragon behind him. The call came from the same source—a small instrument of bark and wood. And the odor of dragon-suint had come from the bottle in the same kit-bag. Trapped? Tricked! He and the dragon, both. Only—

Only the dragon would not know that, could not know that. His tiny and now-troubled brain served chiefly as a clearinghouse for instinctual responses. Female dragon: Go to her. Male dragon: Will want her, too: Slay him.

The bull in the woods now left the woods behind him and began to cross down the clearing at a lumbering trot, shooting forth his bifrucated tongue, tasting the air . . . air in which Jon-Joras's own scent was mingled with that of the "other" . . . man-scent now inextricably identified in the brute mind with that of its sexual rival and enemy.

The dragon did not know the trick, but the man did. And the man reasoned and the man remembered, the man remembered what Hue had told him in the Kar-chee castle—that the dull brain of the great beast was mastered by misdirection alone. Aelorix and his toadies now had none of the apparatus of the hunt except the single huntgun. They had no beaters, no musics, no archers, no bannermen. They were making up for all that now by using the artificial call-horn and the scent drawn from the musk-glands of some dead bull-dragon. These they had.

Jon-Joras had nothing but his mind.

Again the wind from behind brought the ugly reek and the male call. The dragon ahead paused for a slow second, a shiver of rage moving the powerful muscles beneath the green-black hide. His cheek-nodules began to puff with mindless rage. He bellowed, he hissed, he began to run. Run?

That was what they hoped Jon-Joras would do: panic. Run. *"Maybe, if you're lucky—if you move fast enough—"*

But no man could move fast enough against a frenzied dragon

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so far to safety. Long before he would have a chance to make the dubious refuge of the woods (and behind, the great engine of the pounding dragon-body crashing the trees aside like reeds), the dragon would have seen him running, would have known him by his scent for enemy, and would have run down, seized him, worried him, torn and trampled him.

Thus, the trick. And, thus, the game.

But Jon-Joras wasn't playing according to those rules. His legs still twitched and trembled and he let them. His arms, it was, that moved now, moved swiftly. Arms and upper body slipped out of the loose hospital shirt which was still his only garment; arms reached up to the low branches of the low tree, little more, really, than a large sapling, and tied the shirt to them by its sleeves. The innocent wind at once caught at it and it flapped and flew about and danced.

If the shinning eyes saw it, facets flashing yellow, flashing green, Jon-Joras could not say for certain sure. But the dragon roared at that same second, and at that same second Jon-Joras stooped into the grass which had been as high as his naked breast and now closed over his naked head. He still did not run.

He walked. Knees trembling, body sweating, he folded his arms upon his swift and fearful heart and walked away into the grass at right angles to the dragon's path. He did not look up even when the earth shook and the noise grew nearer, grew louder. Dependent on the meagreness of the animal's mind, hopeful of its not swerving from its path, trusting to its being for the moment intent upon the tell-tale shirt. Jon-Joras walked on.

To the men hiding in the woods it might have seemed that he had fainted after tying the shirt to the tree. Would they realize why he had tied it there? Or suspect in which direction he had gone if he had not fainted? Likely they would imagine that, if he were not now huddled at the foot of the tree, he would be surely taking the shortest way out of the clearing—the one he was now taking.

In which case, they might well divide their numbers and, by circling around, try to head him off. They could not move fast, for they would not dare to expose themselves in the clearing, and it would be slow going in the woods.

The sun was now high enough for him to feel its rays on the side exposed to it. Without lifting his head or shoulders or increasing his pace, he began to turn, turned, and walked in towards the sun. He could not see, he could feel the dragon as it passed, bellowing, to his left. He kept on walking.

It had not noticed him! *It had not noticed him!*

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That it had noticed the shirt was almost certain, for it had paused in its rushing and he could hear the snapping of the tree and (so he thought) the ripping and the tearing of the cloth.

He kept on walking, the sun warmed his naked shoulders, and presently the sun ceased to do so and the grass fell away from him and underneath it was mossy and overhead it was shady. Slowly and cautiously, but still stooping, he turned around. He saw that he had entered the forest . . . and safety.

Farther off a dragon called and sounded, but he could not tell if it were real or false.

Once he had been lost in the woods after a dragon had been busy in a clearing, and he was worse off now than then in that he was now naked. But in everything else he was, he reflected, hopefully, better off. For one thing, he was only a foot-journey away from the town instead of a flight-journey. For another, should he find himself again among Doghunters, he could count on aid instead of capture.

But most of all he was better off now because he had already had the experience. And he was where he now was—and *how* he now was—not because he had fled in numbness from a scene in no way of his own making, but because he had brought himself out of danger into safety. He was mother-naked and alone, there was a wild beast to one side of him and men who sought his life to another.

But—he found to his astonished and his marveling delight—but he was no longer afraid.

The clean, sweet smell of the woods was all around him. A tiny grey creature for which he had no name paused on its way up the side of a leaning tree and regarded him curiously.

"When in doubt," Jon-Joras said aloud, "do as the natives do."

He followed the grey one up the tree and looked all around him.

Dr. Cannatin's clothes were rather too small and the drink poured off the kettle on the fire at his dig was rather too hot and bitter, but Jon-Joras made no complaint. The archaeologist had seemed only mildly surprised ("On Grimaldi *gamma*," he explained, afterwards, "where I've done most of my work, the people go naked all the time.") when his young acquaintance came prancing out of the woods. By now he appeared to have forgotten that he had ever been surprised at all.

"Three potshards and half a glass medicine bottle may not seem like much to you," Dr. Cannatin said. "For two weeks work," I mean. "But I can assure you of the value of the—"

"On M.M. *beta* there is no

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archaeology to speak of at all," Jon-Joras observed.

"Yes, so people keep telling me. How do they *live* there, I wonder? How do they manage to *live?*"

The young man had no answer and merely smiled, wearily. His most recent host next proceeded to explain to him that the medicine bottle was not of a particularly rare type, on the contrary, it was found with sufficient frequency to justify dating other artifacts by its presence. "We are, however, still not certain what the name of the medicine was. Hrospard Uu—you've of course read his *Tentative Glottochronology of the Ichthyopophagous Peoples* of Alghol—Uu claims it was called 'colacola'; on the other hand, Dr. Pix, the labial surd chap, insists that 'co-co-co' is the proper form."

He looked up in some annoyance as a flyer hummed into sight and put down about a hundred yards away.

"Here are those bothersome people again," he observed, vexed. Several men got out. "That big fellow has already been here twice this morning, babbling nonsense about something. From that godawful place, as I suppose it must be, where there's no archaeology. How do they live?" he asked himself—his young guest having abruptly gotten up and walked away. "How do they *live.*"

At the first sight and sound of the flyer Jon-Joras had gone tense. He did not think it likely to contain Aelorix and his thugs; still, one never knew. After only a moment he had relaxed again. They would not dare try anything in the presence of a Confederation archaeologist. And then the flyer's passengers had gotten out . . .

The big man stood looking as Jon-Joras approached. His face was stiff, intent, and (so it seemed) unreproachful only by effort. A pang went through the younger man as he noted this. However he may have failed to carry out his instructions, fulfil his assigned duties, he had done well enough under the circumstances. *Damned* well enough. He put his head up, and walked on.

The expression on the big man's face shattered like a porcelain masque. He took two steps forward. He took Jon-Joras in his arms.

"My sir and king," said Jon-Joras.

Delegate Anse was a small, thin and precise man whose pale hair was cut in the tonsure customary to his native continent. "You have really done quite a good job, Private Man," he said. "I commend you for it, and I commend you, too, for your choice, Confidential Chief."

Por-Paulo nodded rather absently, and continued to regard his subordinate with affection. For Jon-Joras, however, the Delegate's

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words came as a (by no means unpleasant) shock. *Confidential Chief!* Por-Paulo was one of the one hundred "shadow rulers" of the Confederation, chosen by lot from among the thousands of paramount executives!

Por-Paulo nodded, now, becoming alert to the situation of which the delegate had spoken. "Yes," he said, "and what we're going to do about this whole thing is the next problem."

A sudden thought took Jon-Joras. "Your hunt—Of course you won't have it now—it's too dangerous—"

"Oh, damn the hunt!" Por-Paulo exclaimed. "Do you think I sent you here to be a glorified reservations clerk. I wanted . . . I intended . . . Look here: My term expires in fourteen months and I have no intention of seeking another one. I've done my duty—but I'm fed up with that whole scene. It's like living in a glorified vice, and I feel that if I'm squeezed anymore I'll pop out of my skin like a damned grape. No . . . I've got a chance to do more Confederation work on other underpopulated worlds. I'm going to take it, too.

"I have the privilege of picking my own assistant. I wanted you. You seemed like the most promising private man I'd ever had. But I had to be sure, it wouldn't be fair to choose you until you had a chance to show what you could do on your own. So when rumors began to come in about things down here on old Prime World, and the Confidential Council asked me to have a look, I decided to send you on ahead.

"And I was right."

He asked Jon-Joras if he would be willing to give a year for studies at an advanced collegium in preparation. The young man nodded slowly. He saw, clearly, that if he could have chosen independently, he would have chosen something like this. Other worlds, other peoples, new scenes, new challenges. It was a good life work.

"But what's to be done about things here?" he asked. "Something must be done *now*."

Delegate Anse asked, "Have you no suggestions—after all you've seen?"

Jon-Joras emphatically had. "For one thing, there's got to be a ten-year moratorium, at least, on all hunts," he said, "to allow the mismarked dragons to die off. In fact . . . in fact, it might be best not to depend on their dying off. Send out extermination crews, perhaps, with heavy weapons and simply blow the heads off everything unhatched. We'll have to see about what would be best, there.

"Anyway, the ten year period with no hunts and no money should prove an adequate punishment for our friends the Gentlemen. Some of them will go under,

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of course. But that's all right. Needless to say," his voice and face went grim, "I think personal attention will have to be paid to both Aelorix and that puissant poop, the Chairman of Drogue."

Por-Paulo asked, "But what about the rest of the problem? The Doghunters and their hunger for more freedom and more land?"

Delegate Anse shook his head. He had no suggestions at the moment. Then a flicker passed over his face. "Do *you*?" he asked.

Yes. "There's trouble all along this river," Jon-Joras said, slowly. "But what's beyond the river? I asked myself that once—it seems so long ago, but it isn't—once, while I was looking at the revolving globe-map in the Lodge lobby. *What's beyond the river?* Why—beyond the river is the forest and beyond the forests are the grasslands, and then the mountains. So. And what's beyond the mountains? The desert. And beyond even that?

"Beyond the desert is more forest, more grasslands, more rivers, more mountains."

Por-Paulo said, "Just like this side, only—"

Only, no one lived there. The land was empty, had been since the near-extermination of the human race during the Kar-chee reign; perhaps had been even earlier, when the great push-off to the stars had begun to scour old Earth of its swarming populaces.

"The problem is hardly one of over-population of the whole area, you see," Jon-Joras said. "This particular land-mass could support, oh, many times its present population. But the Gentlemen are keeping most of it idle as a dragon preserve. And the grasslands, of course, belong to the nomad herdsmen."

Delegate Anse said, precisely, "A ten-year moratorium on hunts will be hard enough to put through and maintain. Any abruptly permanent social change based on the perpetual abolition of the hunts would hardly be acceptable."

Jon-Joras shook his head. "I don't propose turning this part of the continent over to the land-hungry. I propose taking them to where there's land enough and more—and no people at all—and particularly no Hunts. I seem to remember that there were great migrations on Prime World before. I don't exactly know why there haven't been any in this epoch, but I could guess . . . fear of dragons in the woods . . . fear of hostile nomads . . . . fear of the great mountains and the deserts . . .

"It can be overcome. It *can* be done. All those who aren't satisfied with things as they now are in the city-states—plenty are—can be moved beyond the mountains and the desert. They were bound to try it eventually, I think. But they'll need help. We can do it,

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the Confederation can do it, can help them, set them up. But only those who want things to be set up differently—no estates, no hunts, no classes. Those who like things just as they are, here and now, can stay here."

The two older men were silent a moment.

"I see no reason why not," Delegate Anse finally replied.

"It might just do," Por-Paulo said. Then he said, "And now—shall we get you some clothes that fit you and then celebrate the occasion with the best that Peramis affords? We have a lot to—"

"We do," Jon-Joras said. "Clothes, yes. But *our* celebration will have to wait a bit. I don't know exactly how long. There is someone I must find before I do anything else."

Por-Paulo did not hear this happily. Then a look of surprise was followed by a smile. "A girl?" he asked.

"Yes," Jon-Joras said. "A girl."

An expanded and somewhat different version of ROGUE DRAGON will be published by Ace Books.

COMING SOON

Next month's feature is an alarming story by **WILLIAM TENN**—in which Mr. Tenn envisions a future when women have Taken Over. This is the document of the predictable reaction, a brilliant and *funny* satire entitled THE MASCULINIST REVOLT. **GORDON R. DICKSON** returns with a novelet about the search for a 200-year-old space cruiser and its mysterious pilot—THE IMMORTAL. Scheduled for upcoming issues are stories by **JAMES BLISH, CHAD OLIVER, BRIAN ALDISS, ROBERT F. YOUNG, ZENNA HENDERSON** and many others.

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COMPUTER DIAGNOSIS

by Theodore L. Thomas

THE COMPUTER NOW SERVES AS a tool in medical diagnosis. Recent research on coronary heart diseases has leaned heavily on computers, and not just to sock away information, either. The computer was vital in setting up guidelines for future diagnosis.

Coronary heart diseases are a group of diseases involving the coronary arteries that carry the blood into the heart. Workers in the field have thought that the personality of a man was related to his chances of getting this type of heart disease. Computer analysis proved it by showing that men who seldom had it were more outgoing, sociable, and relaxed. On the other hand, men who developed clots in the coronary arteries were worriers who drove themselves hard and who couldn't let off steam by talking about it. Another type of victim was the man who worried about his health whether there was anything wrong or not. He often finally got it good—angina pectoris, in which the coronary arteries deliver too little blood to the heart. The computers helped set up the rules for future diagnosis of this family of heart diseases.

These results and others like it have helped eliminate the fear that used to be attached to computer diagnosis. The Mayo Clinic now uses a computer routinely to interpret a test to evaluate the personality of all new patients.

High speed computers make it possible to pick the best drug or treatment for coronary heart diseases, depending on the patient's history. The doctors feed in data on weight, blood pressure, medical history, and many other factors, and out pops a treatment. Some of these variables depend on other variables, and others are completely independent. The computer soaks them all up, weighs them, and arrives at an answer. It can also estimate chances of survival.

It is now possible to see good times ahead. With the accumulation of more data on human survival characteristics, the diagnosis of a computer will grow ever more accurate.

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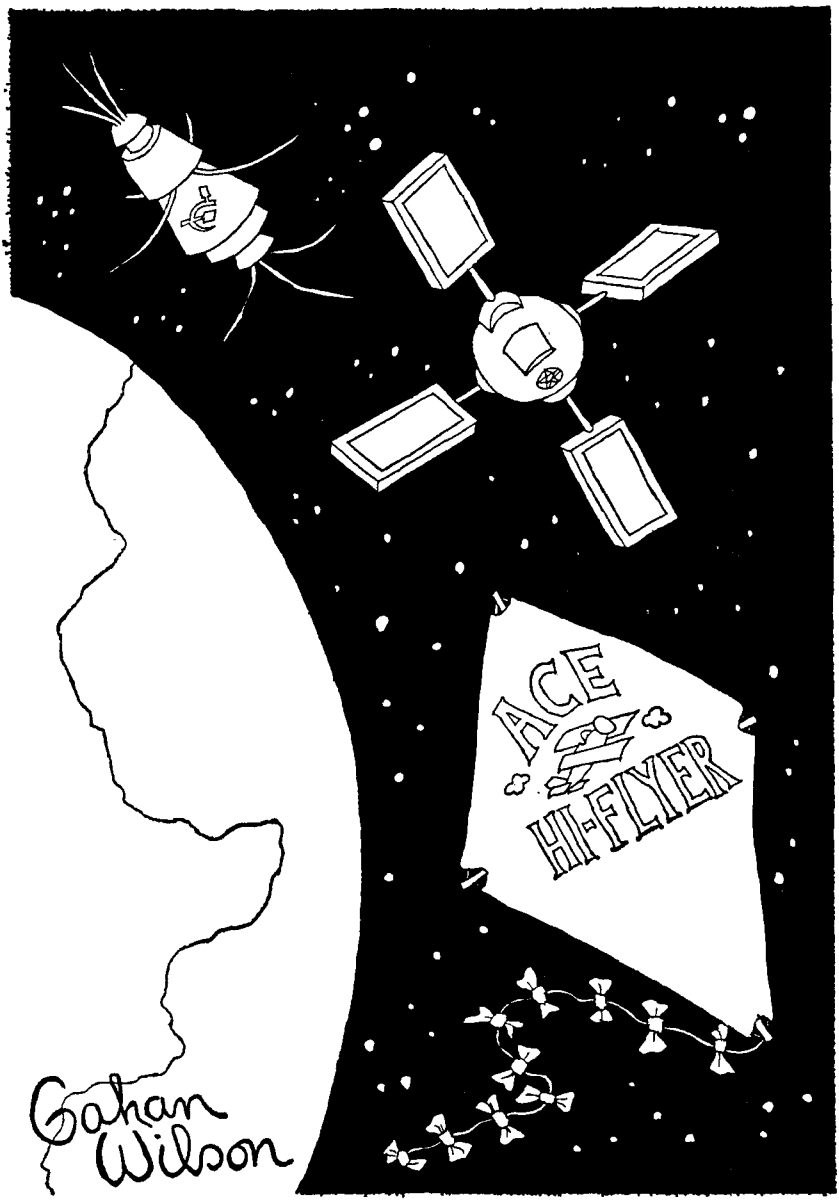

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According to a publication of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, a significant shortcoming of manned space exploration is that "unlike a machine, man is not expendable." Since space exploration has yet to arouse the same fervor as, say, war —that statement is likely to stand for a while. But when it falls, as it surely will, where will the expendables be found?

THE EXPENDABLES

Miriam Allen deFord

SO HERE THEY WERE ON MARS — the first human beings to reach the red planet.

And they were not allowed to leave the ship. And there was only a chance that they would ever see Earth again.

Matt Fessenden looked at his companions—one dying, one out of his mind, and one who looked back at him without need for words to express what they both felt. Uppermost in his thoughts at the moment was the reflection that if one of them had to die and be jettisoned into space on the way back, it was lucky that it was the lightest load for two old people to manage. Then his mind went back to the day when it all began.

The notice had been posted on the bulletin-board of Harvest Home; it had come to them as it had to every rest home, hotel, and neighborhood for the aged in the United States. Not to nursing homes, however; only old men and women in robust health were wanted.

"Greetings," it began. Sam Halliday had laughed. "Takes me back," he said. "Reminds me of the one I got 60 years ago, in World War II."

But this time they didn't want soldiers; they wanted astronauts. And they didn't want them young and healthy and reasonably intelligent; they wanted them healthy and reasonably intelligent and over the age of 65. And it wasn't a draft, naturally, it was an invitation.

"Stands to reason," said Ida Johnston with her usual asperity. "Monkeys and dogs and rats can't

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look after their machinery for them. So we'll do instead."

"There isn't any machinery, as you call it, to look after," Henry Ronk, who had been a superjet pilot until he was forcibly retired for age, contradicted her. "Since the invention of the Istramuri Translator, everything's automatic —the take-off, the trip, the landing, and the return.

"No, it sounds like good sense to me. Everybody knows there's only a chance of getting back in one piece—they say that frankly, themselves. So why waste the lives of young men with futures, potential fathers, when there's this stockpile of old people in good shape but without much life-expectancy anyway? They can get just as much information on response to the stresses from us.

"*I'd* go in a minute, if it wasn't for this darned sacro-iliac of mine."

All this time Matt Fessenden had said nothing, and neither had Emma. They both knew what he was thinking, and that they'd have it out later, in their bedroom.

"You're an old fool, Matt," Emma snapped. "You know very well you'll be 80 next May." Her eyes were wet.

"I've got the constitution of a man of 60—a good, husky man; Doc said so, last time I was examined. I've spent my life doing work that bored me silly, when what I always wanted was adventure and travel. I can't, I just can't turn down the one opportunity that's ever come my way.

"Besides," he added smugly, "it's a patriotic duty. They say they want veterans especially."

"We've been married 47 years," Emma said huskily. "Doesn't it mean a thing to you to leave me like that, probably forever?"

"In the nature of things, Emma, that has to happen soon to either you or me. Isn't this better than watching me cough my lungs up or lie unconscious after a stroke?

"Besides, what's to keep you from applying too?"

"My common sense, that's what's to keep me," Emma retorted. "Who wants a 70-year-old woman with only a high school education, and me with all my allergies, too? I'd probably sneeze my head off from all those hydroponic plants. And I can't see a thing without my bifocals."

"Well," Matt said soothingly, suddenly sleepy, "we've got two weeks to make up our minds. Not likely I'd be taken, anyway. How many millions of us are there?—35 per cent of the population by now, and most of us in better condition than people half our age were 50 years ago, thanks to modern medicine. And how many do they want out of all those millions? Just 40 to train, and only four for the first trip.

"Let me have my try at a last fling, honey. There's not one

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chance in a million they'd even answer my application."

But they did.

At the last minute, he almost backed out. Somehow he had never realized what it would mean to leave Emma behind. But by this time she was the resolute one.

"You come back now, Matt," she whispered fiercely, her arms holding him tight. "I'll never forgive you if you don't."

"I'll be back," he promised. "Three years, going and getting there and waiting for the right time to start home again and returning—what's that?. Time goes awfully fast at our age. I'll be only 83. And think of all they've promised—not just the fame and glory, but a big lifelong income. We can leave here and get our own house or apartment again, with everything done for us."

"If only Phil and Lila had lived—" Emma quavered.

"If we had children living, they'd have tried to stop me; the papers are full of stories about applicants whose kids have made fools of them and treated them like babies. 'My Son Won't Let Me' —that kind of thing. It's got to be a video joke. I'll bet every single one of us 40 trainees is either unmarried or childless or has kids that don't care *what* happens to them.

"Not that I don't wish—"

"I've had you," Emma said harshly, trying to smile. "You see to it that I keep on having you."

"I will, honey. I swear it."

And now here he was, and was he going to be able to keep that oath?

When he got to the training center at Cape Kennedy, he sat in with the 39 others at the first briefing session.

"We're going to level with you trainees," said the colonel, a man about the age Phil would have been if he hadn't had that accident when he was 12. "We're not going to tell you any lies. And any time while you're here now that any of you wants out, he or she can go without any blame or penalty, and we'll fill the place with the next name on a long waiting-list.

"Candidly, this is an experiment. We call it 'Project Expendable.' That may sound brutal, but it isn't so meant. We won't call you heroes or heroines, because those are silly words. You're handpicked from an enormous number of applicants, and every one of you knows perfectly well that the very object of this project is to find out what happens to you, physically and mentally; how many of you come back three years from now, and if any do, what shape they're in when they arrive. You all know there's a good chance you'll die.

"But there's also a good chance that all or some of you will survive. Because there's a big risk of dying, we've let people volunteer whose

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lives in the course of nature are near their end; and we counterbalance the possibility that people of your ages, from 68 to 84, would die under any circumstances within the next three years, against the equal risk to life if we sent young men with their futures still before them. We lost too many in the first trips to the moon.

"We could send animals instead of human beings, as we did before the moon landings, and we could equip them, as you will be equipped, with all the sensitive mechanisms which will keep us informed of everything that happens to you, from your blood pressure to your dispositions. But we couldn't be sure that animals would respond exactly like humans to the unknown conditions you will meet. Moreover, if you do come back alive and well and mentally O.K., you can tell us things, as no animal can.

"Now, before we begin actual preparation, I've laid the whole thing on the line. Anybody who has a second thought after this can wait and see me after the meeting."

Not one backed out.

The crew for the first trip was picked by lot at the end of the training period. Matt Fessenden could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw his name on the list. The afternoon it was posted the colonel called the four of them to a meeting in his office.

There were two women and two men. The other man besides Matt was Roger Horley, 74, who had been a stockman in Texas. The women were Rachel Lee, a retired professor of astronomy in a woman's college, unmarried, 69, and Mary McAdam, a 78-year-old widow, a farmer's daughter and wife from Massachusetts. She had three married daughters, but she never mentioned them; Matt guessed that she was bitter over their relief at escaping the responsibility of supporting an aged mother without money. Horley vouchsafed no information about his marital status; Matt couldn't make out whether he was widowed or divorced or a bachelor past his days of interest in women. He himself was the only one with a living spouse, and certainly Emma wasn't going to have any case for jealousy of those two unattractive females. But aside from that kind of thing, they all seemed amiable enough, and acceptable companions. It was very important, the colonel told them, that the crew members be compatible, and if any of them had antagonized any of the others, a prompt substitution would have been made.

The take-off was frightening, but they adjusted quickly, almost as quickly as they would have done in their twenties. The adjustment to free fall, to food from squeeze-bottles and other strange gadgets, and to the multitudinous

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attachments that registered their metabolism-responses and their brain-waves, took longer, but it came. They had nothing to do with the ship itself; thanks to the Istramuri Translator, there was not the slightest doubt that it would traverse its orbit, land on Mars, and at the proper time take off from Mars and return to Earth. No pilot was needed; the "pilot" was governed by a computer at Cape Kennedy. As long as they were within radio distance, they could and did receive and transmit messages; Matt talked twice to Emma, back in Harvest Home.

To their private astonishment, the voyage became a bore. They were here, not as conductors, not really even as passengers, but as specimens; nothing was asked of them but to *be*. Rachel Lee kept them aware of the Outside, explaining the positions of the planets and the stars, but after a while, when Earth had become a twinkling light, they lost interest. They did not expect to regain it until they neared their destination. They ate, they talked, they slept, they read a good deal, they listened to canned music and watched canned video programs, but for the most part they just waited. There were no accidents.

As a matter of fact, most of their conversation was not about their present, outre as it was, but about their past. It was their only sign that their average age was 75; Matt Fessenden was the oldest, but not by much. An old book Matt had read had said that the main concern of space voyagers was to learn "how to live inside their skin and to defend themselves from the external world." Physically, that was being done for them; mentally, they were unconsciously doing it for themselves.

The first trouble came when they were within a week of Mars.

Up to that time, what with adaptation and accommodation to the unique conditions of their situation, they had hardly existed for one another as individuals, except for occasional irritation at Rachel Lee's didacticism—and that came mostly from the taciturn old Texan, Roger Horley. Physically, he was the biggest and seemingly the toughest of them all, but Matt at least guessed early that under the toughness was a lot of emotional instability. He said nothing to either of the women—in fact, they had no privacy for confidences, for when they were not alone in their tiny sleeping cubicles they were necessarily all in one another's company—but he began to worry a bit.

And, he found out now, with good reason.

Rachel remarked suddenly, "In a week, we shall be the first human beings to set foot on Mars."

They all looked at her in astonishment.

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"But we *won't,*" said Mary McAdam. "We can't leave the ship. Didn't you read the agreement before you signed it?"

The colonel back at Cape Kennedy had exhausted himself making it plain to them. The one thing they must make sure of was that the alien planet should not be contaminated by the microbes of Earth, until everything possible about it had been learned. The ship itself, all the automatic probes and instruments that would be sent out from it and called back to it during the three months' waiting period, would be completely sterile. But nobody can sterilize a living being. Therefore they had solemnly pledged themselves, short of the direst emergency, to remain throughout sealed in their astronautic cage. Rachel Lee had signed that pledge and sworn to it, like the rest of them.

She looked at them rebelliously.

"My whole life," she said, "has been devoted to astronomy. I am the only one of you to whom this is the fulfilment of a lifelong purpose. If it kills me, I'm going to stand on the soil of Mars before I die."

"It'd kill you all right," Matt rejoined bluntly. "You couldn't breathe that thin air for two minutes, with old lungs like ours, without a space suit or at least a helmet—and I suppose you realize they're locked away where you can't get at them without us."

"Then I'll die," retorted the youngest of them all. "I can think of no happier death."

"And contaminate a whole planet to celebrate your romantic end?" inquired Mary McAdam sarcastically. "And destroy the entire purpose of this expedition? And you an astronomer? I'm only a country bumpkin, but I know better than that."

"Take it out in being famous as one of the first to see another planet close up with your own eyes," Matt said pacifically. He was startled by a roar from the big Texan.

It was ludicrous to see a man in free fall trying to hold a fighting pose; but his purple color and his bulging eyes weren't funny. He had spoken little during the voyage; he had remained quiet and contemplative. Now Matt understood that the contemplation had been brooding. The man was in an ecstasy of fury.

"Bitch! Traitor!" he screeched, his clenched fists flailing. Rachel shrank back, her face white. Frantically Matt and Mrs. McAdam propelled themselves toward Horley, struggling to seize him. He threw them off easily.

"Better get in your cubicle and shut the door, Miss Lee," Matt advised her. Trembling, she obeyed. Horley kept on screaming, but by now he was incoherent. They dared not leave him alone surrounded by delicate instruments. Matt received a fist in one eye, and

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was stopped for a moment by the pain. It was Mary McAdam, who in her time had undoubtedly handled berserk cows and bulls, who managed to subdue him; she floated near the raving man, threw her arms around his neck, and squeezed hard. While he gasped for breath Matt got his belt off and slipped it around Horley's arms, pinning them.

Suddenly Horley collapsed, his color faded, and he floated aimlessly, bumping the walls. Between them, they dragged him into his cubicle and strapped him to the bunk. In a few minutes he began to snore.

"Call Miss Lee," Matt said when they had got their breath and their hearts had quieted down. "We've got to talk this over while he's unconscious."

She came, pale and staring.

"What in heaven's name is the matter with him?" she muttered.

Matt shrugged.

"Senile dementia, I'd say. It comes on suddenly sometimes. They were awfully fussy about examining us physically back at the camp, but they missed out pretty badly in the psychological tests." He looked significantly at Rachel Lee. She colored, but she held her peace. "They seemed to take it for granted that if we had clean psychiatric records, they'd be safe. I guess they're more used to the young. One thing's sure, when this ship gets back, they'll never send another loaded with Expendables until they've been passed by a specialist in geriatric psychology."

"It doesn't matter to them," Rachel said through clenched teeth. "They don't care if we live or die or go crazy—all they want is the data to insure the well-being of the really important astronauts—the boys and girls.

"All right," she exploded. "I joined this project to experience at first hand some of the things I'd taught from books. If I get home safely I can remember for the rest of my life that just once I fulfilled my dearest dream. You joined, Mr. Fessenden, I take it, because you were bored with retirement and wanted adventure. I don't know why you joined, Mrs. McAdam—"

"I was lonely," said Mary McAdam simply. "My family was grown and gone away, and I hadn't enough to do any more to keep me busy. So I thought if I could be of any use to my country and to—to humanity in my last years, why not make the offer? But as for Mr. Horley's object, I just don't know."

"I do," said Matt. "Or I think I do. I should have thought of it before.

"Roger Horley was born in 1938, 74 years ago. He's lived in Texas all his life. He was 32 years old in 1970. Does 1970, in Texas, mean anything to you?"

There was a long silence. The

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minds of the two women went back 42 years, and they understood. Horley must have been one of the Texas syndrome victims.

Actually, the disease had invaded the whole Southwest before it was finally checked at the California border. But because Texas was the largest and most populous state in the area, the mysterious plague had by common consent been given its name.

Its etiology had never been definitely determined. It was a virus disease, come from nowhere, similar in some of its symptoms to polio, in others to meningitis. It was resistant to antibiotics. It killed its scores of thousands before at last it was stopped short by discovery of the Hazeldine Specific. Dr. Hazeldine was a research worker attached to the Walter Reed Medical Center.

Those who finally recovered from the Texas Syndrome were not left crippled or invalided; they seemed to have recovered entirely. But the panic which had spread through the affected area, the months of utter despair, and then the miracle vouchsafed by a Government researcher, had had their strange psychological result. Texans had always been a patriotic breed. Every cured victim of the Texas Syndrome became and remained a fanatical, a ferocious patriot.

To Roger Horley, a chance to be of service to his country was a command. To obey implicitly every detail of his country's orders or requests was a sacred obligation. That, obviously, was why he had joined Project Expendable as soon as he heard of it. And Rachel Lee's defiance, which to him was equivalent to high treason, had triggered the onset of senile madness. The cerebral arteries that had burst during his emotional explosion and the physical struggle that followed it would never heal; if he lived to return to Earth, it would be as a terminal dement, perhaps a paralytic as well.

"So now," said Mary McAdam with a sigh, "for about a year and a half more, if we live through it ourselves, we're going to have to feed and nurse that big hulk." She looked reproachfully at Rachel Lee.

The old teacher refused to be intimidated.

"I think it's outrageous," she said bitterly, "that they should have passed anybody with his history. They must have known it. In fact, I suppose the whole corps of volunteers is just full of cured Texas Syndrome victims, each more eager than the next to show his gratitude to the government that saved his life."

"Miss Lee," said Matt Fessenden gently, "I think it's about time you realized that the psychological examinations they gave us were deliberately sloppy. As long as it is reasonably probable that

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we can survive the trip, leaving at least one person to dispose of corpses in space, they don't care what kind of condition we come back in. They might learn more from a mental breakdown than from mental stability. Their object is information, not philanthropy."

"In other words—"

"In other words," said Mary McAdam calmly, "we're guinea pigs. They want to find out what the strain of space travel does to warm-blooded animals. That's why we're here on this trip—with the added advantage that if any of us do get back alive and sane, we can supplement the instrumental information by talking. So from now on, let's all of us stop fussing."

"I'll take on caring for Horley," Matt said heavily.

"I'll help," Mrs. McAdam offered. "I nursed my husband through his last illness."

Rachel Lee said nothing. Ostentatiously she floated over to the shelf they called the library and took a book-tape with which she retired to her cubicle.

Matt's foreboding about Roger Horley was justified. He regained consciousness in a few hours, he was able to hold a squeeze bottle or a urinal, but his mind was gone. He submitted like a baby to the minstrations of his two caretakers. Rachel Lee, who avoided him as much as possible, he seemed not to notice at all.

Matt found himself, in those days, thinking and worrying a great deal about Emma. Horley's catastrophe had brought him up short. Emma was nearly as old as the Texan. What was happening to her, without him, back there in Harvest Home? How was he better than any other deserting husband? He had wanted adventure; well, he had got it, and he found he didn't like it very much. He wished he had never volunteered. Once this trip was over, he'd never leave Emma again.

All that had been a week ago. And now the ship had landed, safely and automatically, thanks to the Istramuri Translator, on the tawny desert sand of Mars, and the probes and recorders and collectors and all the other highly specialized and completely sterilized instruments had projected themselves, also automatically, from the ship and were busily at work until, when the time came for the take-off, they would return just as automatically and settle themselves and their data and samples into the niches from which they would be taken when the ship got back to Earth.

And the four passengers could gaze through the portholes, or watch the video screen, but for all they would ever know of Mars at first hand, they might as well have been back at Cape Kennedy.

Matt Fessenden and Mary McAdam watched for hours with

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keen impersonal interest, ignorant as they were of any of the technical problems involved. "Wait till I tell Emma," thought Matt, and "The children will never believe it," thought Mary. Nobody was sure if Roger Horley knew where they were, or cared; his two nurses had lifted him once to a porthole, but he shut his eyes against the glare of a Martian noon and they carried him back to his bunk.

Rachel Lee was dying.

It was a sort of slow psychological suicide, and neither Matt nor Mary could do anything about it. Something seemed to have broken within her after the scene with Horley. Perhaps it was only that she realized at last she could never fulfill the single dream of a lonely, devoted lifetime. She would not eat, and when they forced or cajoled her into trying she vomited the food immediately—which was a problem while they were still in free fall. So far as they could see, she never slept. Day and night—Martian day and night—she sat propped up by a porthole, moving only to gaze at the screen. Here was what she had wanted, for 70 years now, and she could not have it. It was a question whether she would last the three months they must wait for the right conjunction; there was small doubt that, if she did, she would die before they reached Earth. They had stopped talking to her, for she never answered.

So two of the Expendables had been expended. The two who were left had run out of conversation. There was nothing they could tell, when or if they got home again, that the instruments could not tell better. For his own interest Matt noted that there was no evidence of even the low, lichen-like life forms that had been expected on the planet. As they had come down through the thin atmosphere, they had indeed seen streaks of greenish blue crisscrossing the barren waste, for this was the season for whatever vegetation existed to appear. But now none of the streaks was within sight; and in any case the instruments would find them and report.

If anyone had told them, years before, that some day they would be the first human beings to land on Mars, and that their chief reaction would be utter boredom, they would had laughed in the prophet's face.

Everything went according to regulation. Time passed, somehow, and they were as tired of looking at the Martian desert as they could ever have been of looking at the other residents of Harvest Home or at the neighbors in the New England village where Mary McAdam's children had bought a cottage for her to end her days in. The instruments returned at the appointed time, Horley and Rachel Lee remained unchanged, the ship took off as easily as it had

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landed, and Project Expendable was on the way back to Cape Kennedy.

The voyage in was as uneventful as the voyage out had been until its last week, except for one thing. When Mrs. McAdam went to try once more to keep the dying woman alive, she found her task was over. Breath and pulse were still. They waited until death was unmistakable even to their layman's knowledge, and then they did what they had been ordered and trained to do. For the first and last time the double doors of the airlock were opened. Rachel Lee, whose whole life had been centered on the extraterrestrial universe, was cast into deep space forever.

And then, on the very date foreseen and arranged for, the ship settled back on its native planet.

There was a great hullabaloo of welcome. They had brought Mary McAdam's married daughters and their families—for of course from the time they approached re-entry there had been regular radio communication. And they had brought Emma.

"Matt, you old fool, you're back!" she choked. They clung together, holding each other close, both of them crying like babies. "Back for good, honey," Matt mumbled against her cheek.

Roger Horley had been discreetly collected by the hospital which would care for him thenceforth. Then they turned the two survivors over to the horde of newspaper and video and tridimens reporters and photographers. There had been nobody to notify about Rachel Lee; she had no living relatives.

There was considerable disappointment because the two had so little to say—and this not only because actually they had so little to tell. They had been briefed by their old acquaintance the colonel. Anything except the merest commonplaces was classified as Top Secret.

The two Expendables, with Emma and one of Mrs. McAdam's daughters, were settled in luxurious suites in a posh Miami hotel, pending their final briefing. They were free to go wherever they wanted as long as they didn't leave town, but after one experience of being mobbed in the hotel lobby, the Fessendens kept to their suite and had their meals sent up to them. Then the colonel, annoyed by the continuing disturbance, put a ground-car and driver at their disposal; but Matt was bone tired and Emma not much interested, so they seldom used it. After all, as Matt remarked, when you'd seen Mars there was nothing so wonderful about Florida. Emma and Mary McAdam became very chummy; with the daughter for a fourth, they played a lot of neobridge, just as they had done on dull evenings in Harvest Home.

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Emma began to grow impatient. "When are they going to let go of you, Matt?" she asked. "When does the money start, so we can get away and make our plans?"

Finally, with the news off the front pages and video and tridimens prime time at last, the colonel sent a helicopter to take Matt and Mary back to Cape Kennedy.

Mary's interview was the first, and he did not see her again. His began with compliments, which left him indifferent. At 83, honors and praise are unimportant.

Matt's mind kept dwelling on the plans he and Emma had been making. Not long-range plans—their original idea of buying a house, with all that entailed, seemed foolish when it was likely that their future could not encompass many years. And they didn't want to travel, in whatever luxury: "I *have* traveled," Matt thought with a chuckle. They did want to be together, and they had had their fill of places where old people huddled in isolation from the real world, the world of all ages, mixed. What they wanted was to get back into life again, to think of themselves, not as an aged couple waiting for death, but as Matt and Emma Fessenden, fully participating members of general society, good average citizens of 21st Century America, for whatever years were left.

The colonel's change of tone broke into his musing.

"Now, Mr. Fessenden, comes the hard part. Believe me, I hate like hell to have to tell you."

Matt stared at him, bewildered.

"You remember, of course, all the instruments that went out from the ship and came back with data and samples."

Matt nodded.

"Well, while you and Mrs. McAdam have been waiting in Miami, of course our scientists have been examining and evaluating the material turned over to them. That's why we've had to keep you waiting so long. We got their final reports yesterday.

"Mr. Fessenden, you and Mrs. McAdam and Mr. Horley may be the last, as well as the first, humans to land on Mars. Perhaps no human being can ever live there. Project Expendable, as well as all other attempts to allow even an exploration party to set foot on the planet, will have to be suspended indefinitely.

"Nothing we had ever found out previously prepared us for this. But it's absolutely certain. Perhaps previous visitors from some other planet spread the lethal agent, perhaps it's indigenous to Mars. We may find that out some day, but at present we just don't know. So far as the present situation is concerned, it doesn't matter. We are giving the information in strictest secrecy to all other nations engaged in the exploration of our solar system.

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"The atmosphere of Mars is very thin, but we could easily handle that. We could manage the temperature variations and the absence of water. All this we anticipated. But only direct observation and experience could reveal what the instruments found.

"Every inch of the Martian surface, every grain of sand, every bit of the lichen-like vegetation the instruments found, is impregnated with bacteria of a hitherto unknown variety, the merest touch of which has been proved fatal to every terrestrial animal we have tested—and very probably that will include man. In consequence, we are disbanding Project Expendable immediately, and sending home with our thanks and apologies all the people who have been patiently waiting for return of the first expedition."

Matt cleared his throat.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, sir," he said. "It is a great disappointment, and a great setback to the progress of science. But I'm proud, as Mrs. McAdam must be, that we were able to achieve what no other human beings, apparently, ever may again."

The colonel looked at him sadly.

"Mr. Fessenden, I'm more regretful than I can say. But I'm afraid you don't understand. You two have also been infected. The physical examination we gave you on your arrival has shown that beyond question."

"But that's impossible!" Matt expostulated. "We never left the ship. We risked our lives fighting a madman when Miss Lee tried to leave. And I never felt better in my life."

"I know. Mrs. McAdam made exactly the same reply.

"Allowing for the different timescales, the test animals seemed healthy for proportionately the same period. And estimating from the same basis, if this is fatal to man also, it will take about a year to—to come to its conclusion.

"As for your not leaving the ship, of course that is true also. But the instruments left it, and they came back. We have ascertained that the infection carried in the specimens they collected permeated the entire ship; we have found it necessary to destroy everything, even to the ship itself, since we had no means of disinfecting it. We shall have to devise ways of preventing leakage and handling specimens at a distance before we can send out another, unmanned."

"Where does that leave *us*?" Matt's voice was hoarse.

There was a long silence. At last the colonel muttered, almost to himself, "Miss Lee was the lucky one."

Matt struggled to speak.

"Is it contagious? Have we given it to other people—all those people who interviewed us, the hotel people, Mrs. McAdam's fam-

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ily?" His voice dropped to a stricken whisper. "Emma?"

The colonel sighed deeply. A little color had come back to his face.

"No, thank God," he said. "That's the only good thing about it. It doesn't seem to infect anybody except those who come into direct contact. The scientists and technicians who handled the instruments before we knew—yes, they're all in for it, poor devils. And you, and Horley where he's been sent, and Mrs. McAdam. That's all. But it's enough."

"And what does that mean for us?"

"The prognosis is that fatality, if it comes, will be within a year or so of infection. For that length of time we shall not be able to say for sure whether it is fatal to human beings. And that means that you and Mrs. McAdam will have to remain here for at least that long. . . . I know—at your age that may well be all the rest of your life."

Matt Fessenden got back his self-control.

"I'm sorry about the others," he said. "But some of them must be young, and maybe you'll find some cure for them before it's too late. Or perhaps you'll find it spares human beings, after all. I'm 83 years old; as you say, I'm not likely to have had much more time, anyway. . . . If it happens, will it be—very painful?"

"I can't lie to you. We don't know. It seemed to be, to the test animals. But if it is, we have ways of alleviating the pain."

"I see. What are you going to do with us?"

"You'll have to be under constant observation and care, of course," said the colonel gently. "And in practice, that means hospitalization.

"Your money, naturally, will come in regularly as long as you live, retroactive to the day you were assigned. And under the circumstances, if the worst happens, we've arranged to have a lump sum, based on normal life-expectancy, paid to your heirs—in your case, your wife."

Emma—now he would have to tell Emma. All the plans they had made, all their hopes and expectations, flashed through his mind. He would never let her live alone near wherever they lodged him, just to be able to visit him. He straightened his shoulders and looked at the colonel.

"I guess a lot of people have died to help man's knowledge expand," Matt Fessenden said simply. "And they weren't all expendable, like us. I took the chance in the first place with my eyes open, and I don't regret having been of use. Perhaps they'll find the cure by studying us.

"Will you have me taken back to Miami now, colonel? I must break the news to Emma." ◄

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BOOKS

IN HIS LATEST BOOK-LENGTH angry love-letter to the world,* Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who once spent two days at the Milford Science-Fiction Writers' Conference, has his hero, Eliot Rosewater, crash "a convention of science-fiction writers in a motel in Milford, Pa."

Eliot is somewhat soused at the time. He makes a speech:

> "I love you sons of bitches. You're all I read any more. . . . You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distances without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be to Heaven or Hell."
>
> Eliot admitted later on that science fiction writers couldn't write for sour apples, but he declared that it didn't matter. He said they were more sensitive to important changes than anyone who was writing well. . . . Eliot told the writers that he wished they would learn more about sex and economics and style, but then he supposed that people dealing with really big issues didn't have much time for such things.

The author also explains the essential similarity between pornography and science fiction, inasmuch as both are "fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world."

Now, I don't know if Vonnegut's book is science fiction, or fantasy (of any kind of world), or properly speaking, a novel at all. What it is, is the damnedest plea for human love that I have ever read, written by the tenderest nihilist of them all, with so much viciousness-and-compassion, wit-and-warmth, acid-and-rosewater, that I defy the coolest of detached contemporaries to come away feeling besmirched by noble sentiment.

It starts like this:

> A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people, just as a sum of honey might properly be a leading character in a tale about bees.

And it ends like this:

> "And tell them," he began again, "to be fruitful and multiply."
>
> "God damn it, you've got to be kind."

If this is the theme of the book,

*GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER, OR PEARLS BEFORE SWINE, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr; Holt Rinehart and Winston, $4.95, 217 pp.

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and I *think* it is, the author excepts himself. He is not kind. He is harsh, terrifyingly clear-eyed, and loving. The conniving lawyer, the pompous senator, the confused heir, the jet-set wife, the rich lesbian, the fat insurance salesman, the virgin housekeeper, even the noble fisherman, are shown, every one, in the most pitiless of brilliant light. And every one of them—foolish, greedy, nasty, selfish, prurient, impotent, ugly, false, falsifying—is somehow, in the hands of this most extraordinary of contemporary writers, an object of love: yours as well as his.

As I said, I don't know what "category" a book like this belongs in; one of the best things about Vonnegut is that he never has been taggable. I have a vaguely indignant feeling that he went too far—that he must have infringed something in an anti-trust law, or maybe some part of the Bill of Rights—when he plunked down his critical views on science fiction smack in the middle of a book almost sure to be reviewed by s-f critics. On the other hand, it was precisely this episode (together with an s-f author inside the book, name of Kilgore Trout), which provided the handle to pull the whole thing into this column—and, further, to initiate with it a discussion which will, I trust, put an end to the necessity for categorizing and justifying hereafter.

The fact is, I don't think the outworn label, science fiction, means much of anything any more, except a description of an attitude. My own frequently stated attempt at definition, having to do with interaction between environment and characters, and between emotional and intellectual problems, was thrown, deservedly, in my teeth recently by the *New York Herald Tribune's* Maurice Dolbier, who pointed out that my formulation would include, for instance, WAR AND PEACE. Barely a month later, I found myself doing battle with Tex McCrary in a radio interview, because I would not grant that MEIN KAMPF, a predictive and superficially logical fantasy, was science fiction. Another of my favorite phrases was pounded to shreds for me by Seymour Krim, editor of *Nugget* magazine, when he insisted that "disciplined imagination" was a redundancy—that discipline is the component that changes fantasy into imagination.

Now, just a few days ago, I had a letter from James Ballard, whose newest book is reviewed below, describing his story, *The Terminal Beach*, as well as the novel, THE DROWNED WORLD*,

*THE DROWNED WORLD and THE WIND FROM NOWHERE (two novels in one volume), J. G. Ballard; Doubleday, $4.50, 162 pp & 150 pp, resp.

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as expressions of what he calls "inner space—that area where the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche meet and fuse. Only in this area can one find the true subject matter of a mature science fiction." Now this sounds to me much more like a definition of poetry—but I know beyond a doubt that, to my taste, Ballard is writing some of the finest s-f in the field. And anyhow—

There was this other letter, a week or so earlier, from Peter Redgrove, also in England, a scientist-poet now teaching English literature at the University of Leeds, and currently preparing "an anthology with commentary for the B.B.C., that will show, I hope, that poetry and SF are trying to digest the same things, and that so far SF has done more, but that poetry will win out in the end. I'm taking machines specifically—machines are so much in our lives, but there's been no poetry of the first rank about machines . . ." And in a scribbled PS, he offers *his* definition: "An SF story is one that shows that matter and spirit are the two sides of the one coin."

There is a certain correlation of intent, if not of denotation, between Redgrove's remarks and Ballard's and Vonnegut's—but let me add quickly, lest anyone feel any part of the confusion dispelled, two further brief items:

A few weeks ago, I found myself in a discussion with Terry Carr, co-editor of an excellent new annual anthology (to be reviewed next month by Ted White). I also edit an annual anthology; Carr's is "pure science fiction," and mine includes science fiction in a much wider total range. Presumably, we both know the difference—whether we can define it or not. Yet, although both of us had *liked* both stories, I denied that "The House by the Crab Apple Tree" (S. S. Johnson, *F&SF*, 2/64) was science fiction; he insisted that "Once A Cop" (Rick Raphael, *Analog*, 5/64) was not; and we were equally flabbergasted.

Finally: I heard a panel discussion on C. P. Snow's "two cultures," and how to bridge them, at a PEN meeting. Arthur Clarke was one of the speakers, and ***he*** said sci-fi *is* that bridge.

If you find all this as instructive as I did, you will be about ready to accept happily this pronouncement: hereafter, the books reviewed here will be included because I think they are of interest to readers of this magazine. If I speak of this book or that one as "fantasy" or "s-f" or "a novel of science" or "satire" or "a serious novel," or anything else, it will be descriptively, and with no intent to label or categorize. Any reader who wants to play the game of Definitions is welcome to do so, and even to inform me if he so

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wishes. *I* shall not make the distinctions.

As it happens, this month there are four books of unusual interest on hand by four of the sweetest-apple writers in or out of s-f; and all of them, although long associated with the field, have demonstrated more than an awareness of sex and economics, not to mention style: Vonnegut, Ballard, Clarke, and Walter M. Miller, Jr. And if there is one point they all demonstrate it is Vonnegut's contention about the belief in a "hospitable universe"—whether "impossible" or "fantastic" is harder to judge.

The Ballard book contains two novels, curiously ill-fitted to share a volume. THE WIND FROM NOWHERE is a good standard s-f magazine-serial novel, well-handled and excitingly told, full of ingenious attention to detail, and well-thought-out background. It is quite unrepresentative of the main line of Ballard's work, and stands in relation to THE DROWNED WORLD rather as a first-rate Hercule Poirot novel does to CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.

I do not mean to equate the author with either Christie or Dostoyevsky. I think James Ballard is well on his way toward becoming the first truly conscious and controlled literary artist s-f has produced. Certainly he is one of the very few who has tried and succeeded at all with modern literary techniques and experimental styles. But, as with most of the far-out writers, I find myself often uncertain, when I finish reading, just what he was trying to tell me —or whether he himself knew.

I am *quite* certain of the effectiveness of his method of telling it, however. THE DROWNED WORLD is, superficially, a story laid in a future where the temperature of Earth is rising dramatically, the polar caps are melting, and the water level is rising all over the globe. The surface action of the story occurs in an area that was once the city of London, now fast regressing to primitive rain-forest. The more essential drama is an exploration, both fearsome and fearful, of that area of human experience which gives rise to such phrases as "collective unconscious" or "religious experience" or "racial memory," and provides endless room for speculation and research in our dreams.

The technical-scientific aspects of the novel are intriguing and thoughtful. The human aspects are confusing, terrifying, fascinating, and all too often brilliantly credible: too often, because this is not a happy book. (Yet even here, the author can conclude with a phrase like, "the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun." Man may not know how to live with it —but the universe itself is hospitable.)

Perhaps the most effective and

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striking virtue of this novel is its texture: the very prose has the weight of the waters in it, and its rhythms swell somehow with the slow tempo of the inexorably rising tide. And perhaps it is as well, after all, that the publishers put this in one volume with THE WIND FROM NOWHERE. When you finish WORLD, you can let WIND blow away the thick atmosphere—if you want to.

I want to make it clear, to readers unfamiliar with my attitudes, that I am not given to constant hyperbole. It just happens that out of perhaps a dozen (at least potentially) truly *good* writers who have worked extensively in the broad spectrum of speculative and imaginative fiction in the past fifteen years or so, three are represented this month by samplings of some of their best work.

THE VIEW FROM THE STARS* contains five short stories and four novelets by the author of A CANTICLE FOR LIEBOWITZ. The selections in this long-overdue second collection are all from Miller's first few years of magazine work—and they emerge both remarkably memorable and strikingly fresh. Unlike the compassionate laughter of Vonnegut, or the searing subjectivity of Ballard, Miller is vigorously actional, frequently violent—in his prose as well as his plot. Never quite the poet Ballard can be, nor the satirist Vonnegut is, Miller still contains some of both qualities, and with them an almost savage emotional force that pounds through intellect and art with the roar of a bloodpulse.

This is a good collection, varied and representative, and the more valuable for the recent complete absence of any new work by Miller. Many readers may remember "Dumb Waiter" and "Blood Bank" best; for me, the outstanding inclusions are "Anybody Else Like Me?" ("Command Performance" in its original magazine publication: a depth-study of a telepath), "Crucifixus Etiam" (the Indian laborer and the Mars terraforming), "You Triflin' Skunk" (originally "Triflin' Man," about the product of alien seed), and above all the story (if it can be called that) that first made *me* sit up and take notice of a then-new young writer, the glory-chant called "The Big Hunger," which begins and ends:

> I am blind, yet I know the road to the stars. Space is my harp, and I touch it lightly with fingers of steel. Space sings. Its music quivers in the flux patterns, comes creeping along the twitch of a positron stream, comes to whisper in glass ears. I hear. . . .
>
> . . . I am the spider who walked

*THE VIEW FROM THE STARS, Walter M. Miller, Jr.; Ballantine, 50¢, 192 pp.

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around space. I, Harpist for a pale proud Master, have seen the big hunger, have tested its red glow reflected in my circuits. Still I cannot understand.

But I feel there are some who understand. I have seen the pride in their faces. They walk like kings.

I find it difficult to say which is more surprising—or gratifying: that a poetic statement of the Big Hunger written a long thirteen years ago (as time is measured in technological advance nowadays) should still be valid and exciting in this Year of the Gemini; or that, a scant thirteen years later (as time is measured in literature), there should be an authoritative factual book of the nature of MAN AND SPACE*, published by such notorious non-dreamers as the *Time-Life* people. Lavishly illustrated and lucidly written, this big (8½ by 11 size) book traces the Space Hunger from ancient myths to future hopes, combining the comprehensiveness, authority, and production excellence of a well-organized Luce team effort with the informed prose and clear insight of one of our time's most effectual dreamers, Arthur Clarke.

If you have only one fact-book about space on your shelves, this should probably be it. If you have all the others, add this one; you will find something in it, somewhere, you didn't know. If you are already an expert on space, get it anyhow—for some of the illustrations and photos. (Purchasable only by direct mail from Time-Life Books, Time and Life Building, Chicago, Ill.)

Other books received:

BILL, THE GALACTIC HERO, **Harry Harrison;** Doubleday, $3.50, 185 pp. Lightweight farce with some good laughs here and there, but generally overdone satire on perennial military idiocies.

SPACE OPERA, **Jack Vance,** Pyramid, 50¢, 143 pp. For unlikely reasons, an implausible opera company goes touring through space, complete with wealthy dowager, playboy nephew, and mysterious girl stowaway. Only Vance could have brought this off, and he didn't manage.

TALES IN A JUGULAR VEIN, **Robert Bloch;** Pyramid, 50¢, 144 pp. Ten stories here, and some of them Bloch at his bloody gruesome-chuckle best—but they are all crime-chillers, and not the four s-f entries in the volume.

JOURNEY TO ALPHA CENTAURI, **John W. Macvey;** Macmillan, $5.95, 246 pp. plus appendices and bibliography. One more space-age rehash, this time an uneasy combination of polysyllabic fact and primitive science fiction. Dull.

—JUDITH MERRIL

*MAN AND SPACE, **Arthur C. Clarke and the Editors of *Life;*** Time-Life Books, $3.95, 191 pp. plus appendices and index.

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Richard Wilson has published three novels and 69 short stories, but says that he is basically a newsman (editor with Transradio Press and Reuters for many years, now chief of the news bureau at Syracuse University). THE EIGHT BILLION derives its title from O. Henry's THE FOUR MILLION and Meyer Berger's THE EIGHT MILLION. The "serried bristling city" of New York does not, of course, contain eight billion people. If it did . . . well, read on. If this is not the overpopulation story to end all overpopulation stories, it will at least give them pause.

THE EIGHT BILLION

by Richard Wilson

THE VIZIER TOLD THE KING OF New York: "It's time to go downtown, Your Majesty."

Because of the throng and the hubbub he spoke with his lips pressed to the King's ear. The vizier, who was old, could remember when the little throne-room had seemed crowded with a mere hundred courtiers in it. Now, 40 years later, there were a thousand. He turned his head half right and the King graciously turned his head to put his lips to the vizier's ear.

"Is it really time?" the King asked. He made a happy, involuntary gesture and dislodged the crown of his Queen. "Sorry dear."

"What?" the Queen said. She retrieved the crown from the shoulder of the first lady in waiting, which was as far as it had been able to fall. "We can't hear a word you say."

The King ignored her. The vizier got his lips back to the King's ear and said. "Yes, Sire. Your gracious presence would be most welcome." He spoke in the pre-arranged code.

The circle of nobles closest to the King became aware that a discussion of import was under way and fell silent. They shifted their feet a quarter inch and inclined their heads.

The vizier glared at them. "Hubba-hubba!" he barked.

"Hubba-hubba!" they responded, and not until their chatter had resumed did he again put his lips

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to the King's ear. "The Supervisors are thinking of legalizing death," he said, knowing he would be overheard and deliberately reviving an old rumor for the benefit of the eavesdropping nobles.

"We should not be displeased," the King said. "They could start right here."

"Under the plan the nobles would be exempt," the vizier said. "I think a committee of nobles helped draft the plan."

"That would be a pity," the King said, not bothering to get the vizier's ear back. "Our wish would be to distribute such a blessing democratically, if we may use that word. Hubba-hubba, there!"

The nobles' conversation, which had dropped to a murmur, rose in volume.

"They were thinking of starting at the outskirts," the vizier said. "As you know, the beneficent protection of immortality extends five hundred feet beyond the borders of the county. The thought was to bring it to the very edges, so that if anyone fell off the island he'd be gone, Pfut!, like that. There'd be a law against shoving, of course."

"Very sound," the King said. "But what of those whose business takes them beyond the borders? Some are authorized by us to travel to the Kingdoms of Bronx or Richmond. We must not discourage trade, such little as there is."

Chimes sounded and the voice of the Royal Chef said: "Chow is now down." He was a former mess sergeant.

The voices of the nobles automatically rose again and there was a shifting of feet as they braced themselves. Under cover of this the King sought the vizier's ear and said: "Are they through downtown?" He sounded excited.

"Very close, Your Majesty. They wait only your presence."

"We'll go right after chow."

A mist began to descend from the feeder nozzles in the ceiling. "Odd numbers inhale," the voice of the Chef said. "Deep breaths now. Exhale. Even numbers inhale. Now out. Odd in, even out. Even in, odd out. Keep the rhythm or you'll burst the walls." The Royal Chef talked to the nobles as if they were half-witted privates.

"Oh, damn," the King said. "Essence of plankton again."

"Nourishing, though," the vizier said on the exhale. Then he breathed in hungrily.

"We keep forgetting whether we're odd or even," said the King, who had been breathing at random to the discomfort of his chief minister. "We know we have dispensation but we like to cooperate."

"Your Majesty is odd; I'm even."

"How Our Gracious Queen manages to get fat on this stuff I'll never know," the King said. He turned to her. "*Exhale*, dear, while we're inhaling."

"What?" she said.

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"Never mind, dear." To the vizier he said: "Holy Moly. Can we start now?"

"To the Board of Supervisors' meeting, Sire?" It was on the agenda, and the King must not seem to be rushing downtown.

The King nodded and inch by inch they left, the vizier starting the cry that the nobles took up: "Gutzin for the King! Gutzin for the King!"

The nobles weren't the only idle ones.

There were few jobs other than those connected with essential services such as Communications (skyvision, grown-in radio), Waste Disposal (the daily garbage rocket into space), Feeding, Health, Subways and Sports.

Sports was really part of Communications but had insisted on its own Dukedown. Thus it managed to perpetuate the fiction that its football, baseball and hockey games were live, contemporary contests. Actually they were all on tape or film and hardly a player was still alive.

There was a sound reason. Spectator sports involving mass transportation of people had long since had to be banned. It was no longer possible to get 100,000 or more people in and out of Central Park Stadium for a game—because there were already 800,000 people living there permanently, stacked up in tiers.

The Board of Supervisors' meeting was scheduled to discuss an incident which had occurred on the Harlem River Overbuild.

The 63 supervisors were jammed erect in their meeting room, which had once been a secretary's office in the County Building. There was no room to sit down, even for the King, who stood near a window from which he had a good view of the teeming, spiry colossus he ruled.

The supervisors nearest him were all talking at once, taking advantage of the King's rare visit to advance their private causes. The King listened politely but his mind obviously was downtown.

"I said we can handle it," the Chairman shouted to the vizier. "All we have to do is coordinate menus with the King of the Bronx. His people come crowding across the line when we have parabeef mist and they only have plankton. Our people get trampled. Then they fight. That's what happened at the Overbuild. Near-riot."

"I hear there are people who *never* have plankton," the vizier said. "They circulate around the kingdoms and know just where to be at chowdown. There must be a leak from the Royal Kitchens."

"We'll look into it but it would be better to coordinate. Then it wouldn't matter where they were." The Chairman asked: "Have you visited maternity lately? They're delivering them like shad roe."

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"Sounds like an enforcement-problem there," the vizier said impatiently, with a look across to the King, who had obviously had the word that a breakthrough was near in Project Mohole. "Holy Moly," he had said, hadn't he?

"How do you mean, enforcement?" the Chairman asked. "You can't legislate a pregnancy stretch-out. Nine months and there they are. And the incidence of multiple births is rising, I might add."

"I'm talking about the mating berths," the vizier said. "I know the permits are supposed to be rigidly controlled but I think a shakeup would be in order among the keepers of the keys."

"That's not it. The problem is I.I."

"I.I.?"

"Illegal impregnation. They tell me it's flourishing. Especially at the compulsory sex education lectures. Jam them in like that, co-ed, and then talk about it, and things are bound to happen."

"Shocking," said the vizier, who was unshockable.

"The younger generation seems to be taking it as a matter of course. I've heard one youngster say to another, 'I got a standing start.' "

"Really, Mr. Chairman?" It was an old skyvision joke, actually.

"Facts are facts, Your Excellency. And people are people. Every last mother's son of the eight billion of them."

"Eight billion? I didn't think we were anywhere near that figure."

"As of the noon census estimate," the Chairman said. "It's eight billion, one million forty-two thousand some odd. I tell you, they're like shad roe."

The skyscraper office buildings had long since been taken over as dwellings. This followed naturally after big business fled, driven away by increasing taxes and traffic congestion. No one had really counted noses, but it was considered likely that the office buildings were being utilized at maximum efficiency—between four and eight families could fit comfortably into a suite of offices formerly occupied by one executive and two secretaries. Maybe even 16 or 32 families could squeeze in if you considered the number of high-ceilinged offices which had been duplexed, at least to the extent of stacking up the sleepers in rooms cut horizontally in half.

The vizier got the King away from the supervisors by crying: "We're late! Gutzin! Gutzin for the King!"

What they were late for was the annual Mingle Day. The King obviously was determined to go through with it on his way downtown.

Its full name was Mingle with the Masses Day. The law decreed

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that once each year the King and Queen, accompanied by their first minister, the vizier, must go forth among the multitude to see how unbearable things had become and to listen to complaints.

The vizier dreaded every second of Mingle Day and in recent years had tried to beg off on various pretexts, none of which the King had found acceptable. The King rather enjoyed the custom; he slithered amiably through the crush in his Silicoat, smiling, chatting, shaking hands, signing autographs and generally having a royal time. The vizier did the work.

The Queen, who had joined the King after the meeting, was not so good at slithering, due to her girth, but she was game. Her way was to fix a smile on her face and maintain a steady pace, relying on the agility of her subjects to avoid touching her royal person with their hands, as protocol required. She also wore one of the plastic Silicoats which a clever Japanese commuter had developed early in the history of overpopulation. The Queen called it her slipcover.

The vizier had no such protection. His job was to stand still for the populace and record their complaints. These came at him from all sides as he aimed a button mike at the complainer's lips, cutting him off after 15 seconds, then moving on to the next. Thus the vizier constantly fell behind and had to make wild dashes through virtually solid flesh to regain his place behind Her Majesty.

It was unfortunate that the word that it was time to go downtown fell on Mingle Day, but there had been no way of knowing exactly when the breakthrough would take place. The secret project—boring into the bedrock in search of a legendary vast cavern capable of being converted into living space—had been pushed ahead with all possible speed and now only the King's presence was needed to complete it.

But he must give no appearance of haste lest he prematurely reveal the secret. One could not be sure the Mohole project would be a success, even after the breakthrough.

Within minutes of the time the royal VTO had set the royal party down, the normal crush had progressed from unbearable to next to impossible.

As always, the temper of the crowd changed as it flowed past the King, who received affection, to the Queen, who was accorded respect, to the vizier, who got the complaints.

Some of the complaints were more in the nature of suggestions and used up less than the maximum 15 seconds, such as "Drop dead, Jack," or "Go — — — —, you old — — —."

The vizier rather welcomed these brief imperatives, which helped him make up the time lost

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in recording the comments of those who took their full quarter minute.

Another suggestion he had been hearing frequently in recent years was "Invade Brooklyn; they got lots of room there."

Brooklyn was probably worse off than Manhattan. People had been breeding in Brooklyn in greater numbers, and for decades longer, than in Manhattan and, though interborough statistics were secret, it was doubtful whether Manhattan could survive a man-to-man war with Brooklyn, should the unthinkable ever become think-about-able.

It was likely that the invade-Brooklyn advocates had been subtly misled by the titles of the boroughs' respective rulers into thinking Brooklyn would be a pushover for Manhattan. What the confusion stemmed from, probably, was that Brooklyn had only a Prince, whereas Manhattan had a King. (Nobody suggested invading the Bronx, which also had a King.)

The situation went back to the founding of the dynasties, which had their origin in a newspaper promotion.

One year the journalistic colossus, the *Daily News*, turned from the various publicity queens it had sponsored over the decades and let its readers choose a king.

By chance the winner, in addition to being the handsomest of the candidates, possessed a good brain and a fine speaking voice. Thus the mayor, to whom the *Daily News* had given its powerful support in his election campaign, was delighted to agree to turn over to the "king" some of his ceremonial duties.

Now, therefore, it was the "king" who rode with visiting heads of state up Broadway-High (the upper-level road through the financial district) under the simulated ticker-tape showers, who spoke at Knights of Columbus and United Jewish Appeal functions, who opened new old people's homes, who attended banquets for important business organizations and who went to crucial ball games. As a result the mayor had more time for his job and family.

So well did the "king" carry out his duties that he was overwhelmingly re-elected in the newspaper's poll the following year. In time the quotation marks were withdrawn from around his title, first by the *Daily News* and then even by the more conservative papers, which had given up trying to ignore this creation of their rival. Finally the King, elevated to capitalization and assured of permanent employment and a salary commensurate with his position, became known simply as the King of New York. New York County (Manhattan), that is.

Similarly, after another newspaper promotion, there was elected

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a Queen of Queens (County); an euphonious title. But naturally the promotion to name a King of Kings (every schoolchild surely knows that Brooklyn is Kings County) had to be aborted as blasphemous. Brooklyn chose a Prince instead. His inferior-sounding title notwithstanding, the Prince of Brooklyn was co-equal with the Queen of Queens and the Kings of New York, Bronx and Richmond.

In New York one year, the mayor failed the city in a crisis which the King quietly solved. Soon afterwards the King ousted the mayor from power in a gentlemanly coup. The four other counties being agreeable, the post of mayor was abolished and the Kings, Queens and Prince took over as heads of the autonomous county governments. Later their children succeeded them, either because they had been treated as royalty anyway or through the lethargy of the electorate, and the posts became hardly hereditary, as in the old-fashioned monarchies.

The current monarch in Manhattan was King V, the fifth in his line. By this time they had dropped their common names and started putting on airs, such as talking in the first person plural.

"The plankton ain't what it used to be," a new complainer said to the vizier. "Look into that, will ya?"

"I certainly shall, sir. Next." He was within a yard of the Queen's ample rear.

"The skyvision stinks lately," another said. "Not to mention the way the stars shine through from the back. They even let the moon get in once in a while. Then you can't see nothing."

"I'll take it up with the Royal Communication Commission," the vizer said. "It's ridiculous to be expected to look at the moon when it's skyvision time, isn't it?"

He was a step closer to the Queen, who was virtually at the King's elbow.

"Holy Moly," a strange voice said in his ear.

The vizier looked around sharply. A grinning, crafty-faced man said: "Means something to you, don't it? What are you trying to hide from us, Viz? You're not digging for gold, that's for sure."

"Digging?"

Others in the crowd echoed the word. The two syllables flew off in all directions.

"*Downtown,*" the man said meaningfully. "You know where and why. How about telling the rest of us?"

The King and Queen had gone ahead and were already separated from the vizier by thousands of people.

"What is it?" the crafty-faced man persisted; "an escape-hatch for higher-ups?"

"Whatever is done is done for all," the vizier declared, but the

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truth sounded unconvincing. He was surrounded by unfriendly faces.

Suddenly a knife appeared in the hand of the crafty man.

The vizier sucked in his breath, less from fear than from shock. Never had he seen a weapon outside the Royal Armory.

"Take us downtown," the man said. "We'll help you dig."

Then, as if miraculously, the broad, beloved, Silicoated figure of the Queen slid majestically through the multitude, who fell back respectfully for her.

She fixed the crafty man with an imperial eye and said: "How *dare* you threaten Our Minister?" To no one in particular she said: "Seize the malefactor."

Instantly, as he tried to hide the knife and slink away, he was grabbed by his erstwhile cronies.

The Queen whispered to the vizier: "We heard everybody saying 'digging' and came at once."

Then the King was also there, at the side of his Queen and minister. The vizier had never loved them more.

"Our people," the King said softly, confident that his words would be carried swiftly through the multitude; "we deplore this attempted violence against our honored minister because we deem any such action an attack on ourselves." There was a horrified murmur from the nearer edges of the vast pack of humanity.

"But worse," the King went on, "our heart is sore to think that anyone would impute to us a selfish motive. Therefore we invite each of you to go downtown with us."

When some of the excitement generated by this statement had died down he continued: "The project has been kept secret for one reason only: the possibility that it would fail, thus dashing hopes prematurely raised."

Somehow they got downtown, the teeming swarm of them, coursing excitedly along.

As they went the King explained Project Moly. His words, carried from group to group, told of the thrilling possibility that there were vast caverns below, where a man and his family might have space—room to breathe—a little privacy.

It mattered little that such space would be underground. Nine-tenths of the people already lived at lower or inner levels of vast surface honeycombs where the sun was never seen.

Finally they were "downtown." At the King's bidding, many hundreds were allowed through the doors of the huge warehouse whose cellar had become a massive excavation. Others formed human pyramids, took turns peering in through windows high above street level and told those below what they saw.

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The chief digger led the King down the slope to the excavated depths.

The moment was at hand. The King rolled up his sleeves, grasped the pickaxe firmly with two hands and sank its point into a tissue-thin partition. It went through.

Great cheers went up. The King stepped back and workmen enlarged the hole.

It was obvious, as the scientists had forecast, that there were great caverns below and that they were capable of holding millions—perhaps billions—of people.

For several blessed moments the King and his people stared with awe and silent thanksgiving into the yawning, empty depths.

But soon, first with a whisper, then with a murmur and finally with shouts and cheers similar to those voiced by the Manhattanites only minutes ago, there issued from the depths of the cavern, from cracks and crevices where they must have been hiding and watching, scores, then hundreds of ugly livid people who looked as if neither they nor their ancestors had ever known the sun.

Sensing daylight above, although only the most diffuse of rays could have penetrated these deep workings, the livid people, their sunken eyes asquint and obviously hurting, streamed up along the sloping tunnel as relentlessly as a rising tide in the Bay of Fundy.

Now there were thousands of them—hundreds of thousands.

Ragged, thin, barefoot, their voices a babble of thanksgiving, they pattered past the King and his subjects, who pressed back against the rock wall as the gray tide flowed by.

Their tongue was strange but some root it had in common with the King's English made it possible for him to understand them.

They were saying that their quest had ended; that their prayers to a dimly-remembered topside god had been answered; that their upward borings had not been in vain and that there was surely room at the surface for the teeming, expanding population of the gray people who had been inhabiting the caverns inside the Earth—all eight billion of them.

THE 23RD WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION . . .

. . . will be held this year in London, at the Mount Royal Hotel, from August 27 to August 30. The Guest of Honor will be Brian Aldiss. Membership fees are 15 shillings or $2.00 for non-attending members, 21 shillings or $3.00 for attendees. Treasurer is James Groves, 29 Lathom Rd., London E6; U. S. agent is Bill Evans, Box 86, Mt. Rainier, Maryland.

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If an entity—half-man, half-machine—ceases to function, where is the trouble likely to be found—in the man, or the machine? An interesting problem. If that entity's function is to control the return to Earth of a Manned flight to Venus . . . the problem is suddenly urgent. The problem is herewith posed by Larry Niven, in an absolutely convincing blend of humor and suspense.

BECALMED IN HELL

by Larry Niven

I COULD FEEL THE HEAT hovering outside. In the cabin it was bright and dry and cool, almost too cool, like a modern office building in the dead of summer. Beyond the two small windows it was as black as it ever gets in the solar system, and hot enough to melt lead, at a pressure equivalent to three hundred feet beneath the ocean.

"There goes a fish," I said, just to break the monotony.

"So how's it cooked?"

"Can't tell. It seems to be leaving a trail of breadcrumbs. Fried? Imagine that, Eric! A fried jellyfish."

Eric sighed noisily. "Do I have to?"

"You have to. Only way you'll see anything worthwhile in this—this—" Soup? Fog? Boiling maple syrup?

"Searing black calm."

"Right."

"Someone dreamed up that phrase when I was a kid, just after the news of the Mariner II probe. An eternal searing black calm, hot as a kiln, under an atmosphere thick enough to keep any light or any breath of wind from ever reaching the surface."

I shivered. "What's the outside temperature now?"

"You'd rather not know. You've always had too much imagination, Howie."

"I can take it, Doc."

"Six hundred and twelve degrees."

"I can't take it, Doc!"

This was Venus, planet of Love, favorite of the science-fiction writers of three decades ago. Our ship hung below the Earth-to-Venus hydrogen fuel tank, twenty miles

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up and all but motionless in the syrupy air. The tank, nearly empty now, made an excellent blimp. It would keep us aloft as long as the internal pressure matched the external. That was Eric's job, to regulate the tank's pressure by regulating the temperature of the hydrogen gas. We had collected air samples after each ten mile drop from three hundred miles on down, and temperature readings for shorter intervals, and we had dropped the small probe. The data we had gotten from the surface merely confirmed in detail our previous knowledge of the hottest world in the solar system.

"Temperature just went up to six-thirteen," said Eric. "Look, are you through bitching?"

"For the moment."

"Good. Strap down. We're taking off."

"Oh frabjous day!" I started untangling the crash webbing over my couch.

"We've done everything we came to do. Haven't we?"

"Am I arguing? Look, I'm strapped down."

"Yeah."

I knew why he was reluctant to leave. I felt a touch of it myself. We'd spent four months getting to Venus in order to spend a week circling her and less than two days in her upper atmosphere, and it seemed a terrible waste of time.

But he was taking too long. "What's the trouble, Eric?"

"You'd rather not know."

He meant it. His voice was a mechanical, inhuman monotone; he wasn't making the extra effort to get human expression out of his "prosthetic" vocal apparatus. Only a severe shock would affect him that way.

"I can take it," I said.

"Okay. I can't feel anything in the ramjet controls. Feels like I've just had a spinal anaesthetic."

The cold in the cabin drained into me, all of it. "See if you can send motor impulses the other way. You could run the rams by guess-and-hope even if you can't feel them."

"Okay." One split second later, "They don't. Nothing happens. Good thinking though."

I tried to think of something to say while I untied myself from the couch. What came out was, "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Eric. I've liked being half of this team, and I still do."

"Get maudlin later. Right now, start checking my attachments. Carefully."

I swallowed my comments and went to open the access door in the cabin's forward wall. The floor swayed ever so gently beneath my feet.

Beyond the four-foot-square access door was Eric. Eric's central nervous system, with the brain perched at the top and the spinal cord coiled in a loose spiral to fit more compactly into the transpar-

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ent glass-and-sponge-plastic housing. Hundreds of wires from all over the ship led to the glass walls, where they were joined to selected nerves which spread like an electrical network from the central coil of nervous tissue and fatty protective membrane.

Space leaves no cripples; and don't call Eric a cripple, because he doesn't like it. In a way he's the ideal spaceman. His life support system weighs only half what mine does, and takes up a twelfth as much room. But his other prosthetic aids take up most of the ship. The ramjets were hooked into the last pair of nerve trunks, the nerves which once moved his legs, and dozens of finer nerves in those trunks sensed and regulated fuel feed, ram temperature, differential acceleration, intake aperture dilation, and spark pulse.

These connections were intact. I checked them four different ways without finding the slightest reason why they shouldn't be working.

"Test the others," said Eric.

It took a good two hours to check every trunk nerve connection. They were all solid. The blood pump was chugging along, and the fluid was rich enough, which killed the idea that the ram nerves might have "gone to sleep" from lack of nutrients or oxygen. Since the lab is one of his prosthetic aids, I let Eric analyse his own blood sugar, hoping that the "liver" had goofed and was producing some other sugar compound. The conclusions were apalling. There was *nothing* wrong with Eric—inside the cabin.

"Eric, you're healthier than I am."

"I could tell. You look worried, son, and I don't blame you. Now you'll have to go outside."

"I know. Let's dig out the suit."

It was in the emergency tools locker, the Venus suit that was never supposed to be used. NASA had designed it for use at Venusian ground level. Then they had refused to okay the ship below twenty miles until they knew more about the planet. The suit was a segmented armor job. I had watched it being tested in the heat-and-pressure box at Cal Tech, and I knew that the joints stopped moving after five hours, and wouldn't start again until they had been cooled. Now I opened the locker and pulled the suit out by the shoulders and held it in front of me. It seemed to be staring back.

"You still can't feel anything in the ramjets?"

"Not a twinge."

I started to put on the suit, piece by piece like medieval armor. Then I thought of something else. "We're twenty miles up. Are you going to ask me to do a balancing act on the hull?"

"No! Wouldn't think of it. We'll just have to go down."

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The lift from the blimp tank was supposed to be constant until takeoff. When the time came Eric could get extra lift by heating the hydrogen to higher pressure, then cracking a valve to let the excess out. Of course he'd have to be very careful that the pressure was higher in the tank, or we'd get Venusian air coming in, and the ship would fall instead of rising. Naturally that would be disastrous.

So Eric lowered the tank temperature and cracked the valve, and down we went.

"Of course there's a catch," said Eric.

"I know."

"The ship stood the pressure twenty miles up. At ground level it'll be six times that."

"I know."

We fell fast, with the cabin tilted forward by the drag on our tailfins. The temperature rose gradually. The pressure went up fast. I sat at the window and saw nothing, nothing but black, but I sat there anyway and waited for the window to crack. NASA had refused to okay the ship below twenty miles . . .

Eric said, "The blimp tank's okay, and so's the ship, I think. But will the cabin stand up to it?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Ten miles."

Five hundred miles above us, unreachable, was the atomic ion engine that was to take us home. We couldn't get to it on the chemical rocket alone. The rocket was for use after the air became too thin for the ramjets.

"Four miles. Have to crack the valve again."

The ship dropped.

"I can see ground," said Eric.

I couldn't. Eric caught me straining my eyes and said, "Forget it. I'm using deep infrared, and getting no detail."

"No vast, misty swamps with weird, terrifying monsters and man eating plants?"

"All I see is hot, bare dirt."

But we were almost down, and there were no cracks in the cabin wall. My neck and shoulder muscles loosened. I turned away from the window. Hours had passed while we dropped through the poisoned, thickening air. I already had most of my suit on. Now I screwed on my helmet and three-finger gantlets.

"Strap down," said Eric. I did.

We bumped gently. The ship tilted a little, swayed back, bumped again. And again, with my teeth rattling and my armor-plated body rolling against the crash webbing. "Damn," Eric muttered. I heard the hiss from above. Eric said, "I don't know how we'll get back up."

Neither did I. The ship bumped hard and stayed down, and I got up and went to the airlock.

"Good luck," said Eric. "Don't stay out too long." I waved at his cabin camera. The outside temper-

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ature was seven hundred and thirty.

The outer door opened. My suit refrigerating unit set up a complaining whine. With an empty bucket in each hand, and with my headlamp blazing a way through the black murk, I stepped out onto the right wing.

My suit creaked and settled under the pressure, and I stood on the wing and waited for it to stop. It was almost like being under water. My headlamp beam went out thick enough to be solid, penetrating no more than a hundred feet. The air couldn't have been that opaque, no matter how dense. It must have been full of dust, or tiny droplets of some fluid.

The wing ran back like a knife-edged running board, widening toward the tail until it spread into a tailfin. The two tailfins met back of the fusilage. At the tailfin tip was the ram, a big sculptured cylinder with an atomic engine inside. It wouldn't be hot because it hadn't been used yet, but I had my counter anyway.

I fastened a line to the wing and slid to the ground. As long as we were *here* . . . The ground turned out to be a dry, reddish dirt, crumbly, and so porous that it was almost spongy. Lava etched by chemicals? Almost anything would be corrosive at this pressure and temperature. I scooped one pailful from the surface and another from underneath the first, then climbed up the line and left the buckets on the wing.

The wing was terribly slippery. I had to wear magnetic sandals to stay on. I walked up and back along the two hundred foot length of the ship, making a casual inspection. Neither wing nor fuselage showed damage. Why not? If a meteor or something had cut Eric's contact with his sensors in the rams, there should have been evidence of a break in the surface.

Then, almost suddenly, I realised that there was an alternative.

It was too vague a suspicion to put into words yet, and I still had to finish the inspection. Telling Eric would be very difficult if I was right.

Four inspection panels were set into the wing, well protected from the reentry heat. One was halfway back on the fuselage, below the lower edge of the blimp tank, which was molded to the fuselage in such a way that from the front the ship looked like a dolphin. Two more were in the trailing edge of the tailfin, and the fourth was in the ram itself. All opened, with powered screwdriver on recessed screws, on junctions of the ship's electrical system.

There was nothing out of place under any of the panels. By making and breaking contacts and getting Eric's reactions, I found that his sensation ended somewhere between the second and

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third inspection panels. It was the same story on the left wing. No external damage, nothing wrong at the junctions. I climbed back to ground and walked slowly beneath the length of each wing, my headlamp tilted up. No damage underneath.

I collected my buckets and went back inside.

"A bone to pick?" Eric was puzzled. "Isn't this a strange time to start an argument? Save it for space. We'll have four months with nothing else to do."

"This can't wait. First of all, did you notice anything I didn't?" He'd been watching everything I saw and did through the peeper in my helmet.

"No. I'd have yelled."

"Okay. Now get this.

"The break in your circuits isn't inside, because you get sensation up to the second wing inspection panels. It isn't outside because there's no evidence of damage, not even corrosion spots. That leaves only one place for the flaw."

"Go on."

"We also have the puzzle of why you're paralyzed in both rams. Why should they both go wrong at the same time? There's only one place in the ship where the circuits join."

"What? Oh, yes, I see. They join through me."

"Now let's assume for the moment that you're the piece with the flaw in it. You're not a piece of machinery, Eric. If something's wrong with you it isn't medical. That was the first time we covered. But it could be psychological."

"It's nice to know you think I'm human. So I've slipped a cam, have I?"

"Slightly. I think you've got a case of what used to be called trigger anaesthesia. A soldier who kills too often sometimes finds that his right index finger or even his whole hand has gone numb, as if it were no longer a part of him. Your comment about not being a machine is important, Eric. I think that's the whole problem. You've never really believed that any part of the ship is a part of *you*. That's intelligent, because it's true. Every time the ship is redesigned you get a new set of parts, and it's right to avoid thinking of a change of model as a series of amputations." I'd been rehearsing this speech, trying to put it so that Eric would have no choice but to believe me. Now I know that it must have sounded phoney. "But now you've gone too far. Subconsciously you've stopped believing that the rams can *feel* like a part of you, which they were designed to do. So you've persuaded yourself that you don't feel anything."

With my prepared speech done, and nothing left to say, I stopped

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talking and waited for the explosion.

"You make good sense," said Eric.

I was staggered. "You agree?"

"I didn't say that. You spin an elegant theory, but I want time to think about it. What do we do if it's true?"

"Why . . . I don't know. You'll just have to cure yourself."

"Okay. Now here's *my* idea. I propose that you thought up this theory to relieve yourself of a responsibility for getting us home alive. It puts the whole problem in my lap, metaphorically speaking."

"Oh, for—"

"Shut up. I haven't said you're wrong. That would be an ad hominem argument. We need time to think about this."

It was lights-out, four hours later, before Eric would return to the subject.

"Howie, do me a favor. Assume for awhile that something mechanical is causing all our trouble. I'll assume it's psychosomatic."

"Seems reasonable."

"It is reasonable. What can you do if I've gone psychosomatic? What can I do if it's mechanical? I can't go around inspecting myself. We'd each better stick to what we know."

"It's a deal." I turned him off for the night and went to bed.

But not to sleep.

With the lights off it was just like outside. I turned them back on. It wouldn't wake Eric. Eric never sleeps normally, since his blood doesn't accumulate fatigue poisons, and he'd go mad from being awake all the time if he didn't have a Russian sleep inducer plate near his cortex. The ship could implode without waking Eric when his sleep inducer's on. But I felt foolish being afraid of the dark.

While the dark stayed outside it was all right.

But it wouldn't stay there. It had invaded my partner's mind. Because his chemical checks guard him against chemical insanities like schizophrenia, we'd assumed he was permanently sane. But how could any prosthetic device protect him from his own imagination, his own misplaced common sense?

I couldn't keep my bargain. I knew I was right. But what could I do about it?

Hindsight is wonderful. I could see exactly what our mistake had been, Eric's and mine and the hundreds of men who had built his life support after the crash. There was nothing left of Eric then except the intact central nervous system, and no glands except the pituitary. "We'll regulate his blood composition," they said, "and he'll always be cool, calm and collected. No panic reactions from Eric!"

I know a girl whose father had

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an accident when he was forty-five or so. He was out with his brother, the girl's uncle, on a fishing trip. They were blind drunk when they started home, and the guy was riding on the hood while the brother drove. Then the brother made a sudden stop. Our hero left two important glands on the hood ornament.

The only change in his sex life was that his wife stopped worrying about late pregnancy. His *habits* were developed.

Eric doesn't need adrenal glands to be afraid of death. His emotional patterns were fixed long before the day he tried to land a moonship without radar. He'd grab any excuse to believe that I'd fixed whatever was wrong with the ram connections.

But he was counting on me to do it.

The atmosphere leaned on the windows. Not wanting to, I reached out to touch the quartz with my fingertips. I couldn't feel the pressure. But it was there, inexorable as the tide smashing a rock into sand grains. How long would the cabin hold it back?

If some broken part were holding us here, how could I have missed finding it? Perhaps it had left no break in the surface of either wing. But how?

That was an angle.

Two cigarettes later I got up to get the sample buckets. They were empty, the alien dirt safely stored away. I filled them with water and put them in the cooler, set the cooler for 40° Absolute, then turned off the lights and went to bed.

The morning was blacker than the inside of a smoker's lungs. What Venus really needs, I decided, philosophising on my back, is to lose ninety-nine percent of her air. That would give her a bit more than half as much air as Earth, which would lower the greenhouse effect enough to make the temperature livable. Drop Venus' gravity to near zero for a few weeks and the work would do itself.

The whole damn universe is waiting for us to discover antigravity.

"Morning," said Eric. "Thought of anything?"

"Yes." I rolled out of bed. "Now don't bug me with questions. I'll explain everything as I go."

"No breakfast?"

"Not yet."

Piece by piece I put my suit on, just like one of King Arthur's gentlemen, and went for the buckets only after the gantlets were on. The ice, in the cold section, was in the chilly neighborhood of absolute zero. "This is two buckets of ordinary ice," I said, holding them up. "Now let me out."

"I should keep you here 'til you talk," Eric groused. But the doors opened and I went out onto the

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wing. I started talking while I unscrewed the number two right panel.

"Eric, think a moment about the tests they run on a manned ship before they'll let a man walk into the lifesystem. They test every part separately and in conjunction with other parts. Yet if something isn't working, either it's damaged or it wasn't tested right. Right?"

"Reasonable." He wasn't giving away anything.

"Well, nothing caused any damage. Not only is there no break in the ship's skin, but no coincidence could have made both rams go haywire at the same time. So something wasn't tested right."

I had the panel off. In the buckets the ice boiled gently where it touched the surfaces of the glass buckets. The blue ice cakes had cracked under their own internal pressure. I dumped one bucket into the maze of wiring and contacts and relays, and the ice shattered, giving me room to close the panel.

"So I thought of something last night, something that wasn't tested. Every part of the ship must have been in the heat-and-pressure box, exposed to artificial Venus conditions, but the ship as a whole, a unit, couldn't have been. It's too big." I'd circled around to the left wing and was opening the number three panel in the trailing edge. My remaining ice was half water and half small chips; I sloshed these in and fastened the panel. "What cut your circuits must have been the heat or the pressure or both. I can't help the pressure, but I'm cooling these relays with ice. Let me know which ram gets its sensation back first, and we'll know which inspection panel is the right one."

"Howie. Has it occurred to you what the cold water might do to those hot metals?"

"It could crack them. Then you'd lose all control over the ramjets, which is what's wrong right now."

"Uh. Your point, partner. But I still can't feel anything."

I went back to the airlock with my empty buckets swinging, wondering if they'd get hot enough to melt. They might have, but I wasn't out that long. I had my suit off and was refilling the buckets when Eric said, "I can feel the right ram."

"How extensive? Full control?"

"No, I can't feel the temperature. Oh, here it comes. "We're all set, Howie."

My sigh of relief was sincere.

I put the buckets in the freezer again. We'd certainly want to take off with the relays cold. The water had been chilling for perhaps twenty minutes when Eric reported, "Sensation's going."

"What?"

"Sensation's going. No temperature, and I'm losing fuel feed con-

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trol. It doesn't stay cold long enough."

"Ouch! Now what?"

"I hate to tell you. I'd almost rather let you figure it out for yourself."

I had. "We go as high as we can on the blimp tank, then I go out on the wing with a bucket of ice in each hand—"

We had to raise the blimp tank temperature to almost eight hundred degrees to get pressure, but from then on we went up in good shape. To sixteen miles. It took three hours.

"That's as high as we go," said Eric. "You ready?"

I went to get the ice. Eric could see me, he didn't need an answer. He opened the airlock for me.

Fear I might have felt, or panic, or determination or self sacrifice—but there was nothing. I went out feeling like a used zombie.

My magnets were on full. It felt like I was walking through shallow tar. The air was thick, though not as heavy as it had been down there. I followed my headlamp to the number two panel, opened it, poured ice in and threw the bucket high and far. The ice was in one cake. I couldn't close the panel. I left it open and hurried around to the other wing. The second bucket was filled with exploded chips; I sloshed them in and locked the number two left panel and came back with both hands free. It still looked like limbo in all directions, except where the headlamp cut a tunnel through the darkness, and—my feet were getting hot. I closed the right panel on boiling water and sidled back along the hull into the airlock.

"Come in and strap down," said Eric. "Hurry!"

"Gotta get my suit off." My hands had started to shake from reaction. I couldn't work the clamps.

"No you don't. If we start right now we may get home. Leave the suit on and come in."

I did. As I pulled my webbing shut, the rams roared. The ship shuddered a little, then pushed forward as we dropped from under the blimp tank. Pressure mounted as the rams reached operating speed. Eric was giving it all he had. It would have been uncomfortable even without the metal suit around me. With the suit on it was torture. My couch was afire from the suit, but I couldn't get breath to say so. We were going almost straight up.

We had gone twenty minutes when the ship jerked like a galvanised frog. "Ram's out," Eric said calmly. "I'll use the other." Another lurch as we dropped the dead one. The ship flew on like a wounded penguin, but still accelerating.

One minute . . . two . . .

The other ram quit. It was as if

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we'd run into molasses. Eric blew off the ram and the pressure eased. I could talk.

"Eric."

"What?"

"Got any mashmallows?"

"*What?* Oh, I see. Is your suit tight?"

"Sure."

"Live with it. We'll flush the smoke out later. I'm going to coast above some of this stuff, but when I use the rocket it'll be savage. No mercy."

"Will we make it?"

"I think so. It'll be close."

The relief came first, icy cold. Then the anger. "No more inexplicable numbnesses?" I asked.

"No. Why?"

"If any come up you'll be sure and tell me, won't you?"

"Are you getting at something?"

"Skip it." I wasn't angry any more.

"I'll be damned if I do. You know perfectly well it was mechanical trouble, you fool. You fixed it yourself!"

"No. I convinced you I must have fixed it. You needed to believe the rams *should* be working again. I gave you a miracle cure, Eric. I just hope I don't have to keep dreaming up new placebos for you all the way home."

"You thought that, but you went out on the wing sixteen miles up?" Eric's machinery snorted. "You've got guts where you need brains, Shorty."

I didn't answer.

"Five thousand says the trouble was mechanical. We let the mechanics decide after we land."

"You're on."

"Here comes the rocket. Two, one—"

It came, pushing me down into my metal suit. Sooty flames licked past my ears, writing black on the green metal ceiling, but the rosy mist before my eyes was not fire.

The man with the thick glasses spread a diagram of the Venus ship and jabbed a stubby finger at the trailing edge of the wing. "Right around here," he said. "The pressure from outside compressed the wiring channel a little, just enough so there was no room for the wire to bend. It had to act as if it were rigid, see? Then when the heat expanded the metal these contacts pushed past each other."

"I suppose it's the same design on both wings?"

He gave me a queer look. "Well, naturally."

I left my check for $5000 in a pile of Eric's mail and hopped a plane for Brasilia. How he found me I'll never know, but the telegram arrived this morning.

HOWIE COME HOME ALL IS FORGIVEN

DONOVANS BRAIN

I guess I'll have to. ◄

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SCIENCE

EXCLAMATION POINT!

by Isaac Asimov

IT IS A SAD THING TO BE UNREQUITEDLY IN LOVE, I CAN TELL you. The truth is that I love mathematics and mathematics is completely indifferent to me.

Oh, I can handle the elementary aspects of math all right but as soon as subtle insights are required, she goes in search of someone else. She's not interested in me.

I know this because every once in a while I get all involved with pencil and paper, on the track of some great mathematical discovery and so far I have obtained only two kinds of results: 1) completely correct findings that are quite old, and 2) completely new findings that are quite wrong.

For instance (as an example of the first class of results), I discovered, when I was quite young, that the sums of successive odd numbers were successive squares. In other words: $1 = 1$; $1 + 3 = 4$; $1 + 3 + 5 = 9$; $1 + 3 + 5 + 7 = 16$, and so on. Unfortunately, Pythagoras knew this too in 500 B.C., and I suspect that some Babylonian knew it in 1500 B.C.

An example of the second kind of result involves Fermat's Last Theorem.* I was thinking about it a couple of months ago when a sudden flash of insight struck me and a kind of luminous glow irradiated the interior of my skull. *I was able to prove the truth of Fermat's Last Theorem in a very simple way.*

When I tell you that the greatest mathematicians of the last three centuries have tackled Fermat's Last Theorem with ever-increasingly-sophisticated mathematical tools and that all have failed, you will realize what a stroke of unparalleled genius it was for me to succeed with nothing more than ordinary arithmetical reasoning.

My delirium of ecstasy did not completely blind me to the fact that my proof depended upon one assumption which I could check very

** I'm not going to discuss that here—maybe another time. Suffice it to say now that it is the most famous unsolved problem in mathematics.*

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easily with pencil and paper. I went upstairs to my study to carry that check through—stepping very carefully so as not to jar all that brilliance inside my cranium.

You guessed it, I'm sure. My assumption proved to be quite false inside of a few minutes. Fermat's Last Theorem was not proven after all; and my radiance paled into the light of ordinary day as I sat at my desk, disappointed and miserable.

Now that I have recovered completely, however, I look back on that episode with some satisfaction. After all, for five minutes, I was *convinced* that I was soon to be recognized as the most famous living mathematician in the world, and words cannot express how wonderful that felt while it lasted!

On the whole, though, I suppose that true old findings, however minor, are better than new false ones, however major. So I will trot out for your delectation, a little discovery of mine which I made just the other day but which, I am certain, is over three centuries old.

However, I've never seen it anywhere, so until some Gentle Reader writes to tell me who first pointed it out and when, I will adopt the discovery as the Asimov Series.

First, let me lay the groundwork.

We can begin with the following expression; $(1 + 1/n)^n$ where n can be set equal to any whole number. Suppose we try out a few numbers.

If $n = 1$, the expression become $(1 + 1/1)^1 = 2$. If $n = 2$, the expression becomes $(1 + 1/2)^2$ or $(3/2)^2$ or 9/4 or 2.25. If $n = 3$, the expression becomes $(1 + 1/3)^3$ or $(4/3)^3$ or 64/27 or about 2.3074.

We can make a little table of the value of the expression for a selection of various values of n:

n	$(1 + 1/n)^n$
1	2
2	2.25
3	2.3704
4	2.4414
5	2.4888
10	2.5936
20	2.6534
50	2.6915
100	2.7051
200	2.7164

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As you see, the higher the value of n, the higher the value of the expression $(1 + 1/n)^n$. Nevertheless, the value of the expression increases more and more slowly as n increases. When n doubles from 1 to 2, the expression increases in value by 0.25. When n doubles from 100 to 200, the expression increases in value only by 0.0113.

The successive values of the expression form a "converging series" which reaches a definite limiting value. That is, the higher the value of n, the closer the value of the expression comes to a particular value without ever quite reaching it (let alone getting past it).

The limiting value of the expression $(1 + 1/n)^n$ as n grows larger without limit, turns out of be an unending, transcendental decimal (see TOOLS OF THE TRADE, F & SF, September 1960), which is conventionally represented by the symbol, e.

It so happens that the quantity, e, is extremely important to mathematicians. It is quite comparable to π in that respect (see A PIECE OF PI, F & SF, May 1960) and mathematicians have made use of computers to calculate its value to thousands of decimal places. Shall we make do with 50? All right. The value of e is:

2.71828182845904523536028747135266249775724709369995. . . .

You may wonder how mathematicians compute the limit of the expression to so many decimal places. Even when I carried n up to 200 and solved for $(1 + 1/200)^{200}$, I only got e correct to two decimal places. Nor can I reach higher values of n. I solved the equation for $n = 200$ by the use of five-place logarithm tables—the best available in my library—and those aren't accurate enough to handle values of n over 200 in this case. In fact, I don't trust my value for $n = 200$.

Fortunately, there are other ways of determining e. Consider the following series: $2 + 1/2 + 1/6 + 1/24 + 1/120 + 1/720 \ldots$

There are six members in this series of numbers as far as I've given it above, and the successive sums are:

$2 =$	2
$2 + 1/2 =$	2.5
$2 + 1/2 + 1/6 =$	2.6666....
$2 + 1/2 + 1/6 + 1/24 =$	2.7083333....
$2 + 1/2 + 1/6 + 1/24 + 1/120 =$	2.7166666....
$2 + 1/2 + 1/6 + 1/24 + 1/120 + 1/720 =$	2.71805555....

In other words, by a simple addition of six numbers, a process for which I don't need a table of logarithms at all, I worked out e correct to three decimal places.

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If I add a seventh number in the series, then an eighth and so on, I could obtain *e* correct to a surprising number of additional decimal places. Indeed, the computer which obtained the value of *e* to thousands of places made use of the series above, summing thousands of fractions in the series.

But how does one tell what the next fraction in the series will be? In a useful mathematical series, there should be some way of predicting every member of the series from the first few. If I began a series as follows: 1/2 + 1/3 + 1/4 + 1/5 . . . you would, without trouble, continue onward . . . 1/6 + 1/7 + 1/8. . . . Similarly, if a series began 1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 +1/16 . . . you would be confident in continuing . . . 1/32 + 1/64 + 1/128 . . .

In fact, an interesting parlor game for number-minded individuals would be to start a series and then ask for the next number. As simple examples consider:

2, 3, 5, 7, 11. . . .

2, 8, 18, 32, 50. . . .

Since the first series is the list of primes, the next number is obviously 13. Since the second series consists of numbers that are twice the list of successive squares, the next number is 72.

But what are we going to do with a series such as:

2 + 1/2 +1/6 + 1/24 + 1/120 + 1/720 . . .

What is the next number?

If you know, the answer is obvious, but if you *hadn't* known, would you have been able to see it? And if you *don't* know, can you see it?

Just briefly, I am going to introduce a drastic change of subject.

Did any of you ever read Dorothy Sayers' NINE TAILORS? I did, many years ago. It is a murder mystery, but I remember nothing of the murder, of the characters, of the action, of anything at all but for one item. That one item involves "ringing the changes."

Apparently (I slowly gathered as I read the book) in ringing the changes, you begin with a series of bells tuned to ring different notes, with one man at the rope of each bell. The bells are pulled in order: do, re, mi, fa, and so on. Then, they are pulled again, in a different order. Then, they are pulled again in a still different order. Then, they are pulled again—

You keep it up until all the possible orders (or "changes") in which the bells may be rung *are* rung. One must follow certain rules in doing so, such that no one bell, for instance, can be shifted more than one unit out of its place in the previous change. There are different

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patterns of shifting the order in the various kinds of change-ringing and these patterns are interesting in themselves. However, all I am dealing with here are the total number of possible changes connected with a fixed number of bells.

Let's symbolize a bell by an exclamation point (!) to represent its clapper, so that we can speak of one bell as 1!, two bells as 2! and so on.

No bells at all can be rung in one way only—by not ringing—so $0! = 1$. One bell can only be rung in one way—bong—so $1! = 1$. Two bells, *a* and *b*, can clearly be rung in two ways, *ab* and *ba*, so $2! = 2$.

Three bells, *a*, *b*, and *c*, can be rung in six ways: *abc*, *acb*, *bac*, *bca*, *cab*, and *cba*, and no more, so $3! = 6$. Four bells, *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d*, can be rung in just 24 different ways. I won't list them all, but you can start with *abcd*, *abdc*, *acdb*, and *acbd* and see how many more changes you can list. If you can list 25 different and distinct orders of writing four letters, you have shaken the very foundations of mathematics, but I don't expect you will be able to do it. Anyway, $4! = 24$.

Similarly (take my word for it for just a moment) five bells can be rung in 120 different changes and six bells in 720, so that $5! = 120$ and $6! = 720$.

By now I think you've caught on. Suppose we look again at the series that gives us our value of *e*: $2 + 1/2 + 1/6 + 1/24 + 1/120 + 1/720 \ldots$ and write it this way:

$$e = 1/0! + 1/1! + 1/2! + 1/3! + 1/4! + 1/5! + 1/6! \ldots$$

Now we know how to generate the fractions next in line. They are $\ldots + 1/7! + 1/8! + 1/9!$ and so on forever.

To find the values of fractions such as 1/7!, 1/8! and 1/9!; you must know the value of 7!, 8! and 9! and to know that you must figure out the number of changes in a set of seven bells, eight bells, and nine bells.

Of course, if you're going to try to list all possible changes and count them, you'll be at it all day; and you'll get hot and confused besides.

Let's search for a more indirect method, therefore.

We'll begin with four bells, because fewer bells offer no problem. Which bell shall we ring first? Any of the four, of course, so we have 4 choices for first place. For each one of these 4 choices, we can choose any of three bells (any one, that is, except the one already chosen for first place) so that for the first two places in line we have 4×3 possibilities. For each of these we can choose either of the two remaining

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bells for third place, so that for the first three places, we have $4 \times 3 \times 2$ possibilities. For each of these possibilities there remains only one bell for fourth place, so for all four places there are $4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$ arrangements.

We can say then, that $4! = 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 24$.

If we work out the changes for any number of bells, we will reach similar conclusions. For seven bells, for instance, the total number of changes is $7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 5{,}040$. We can say, then, that $7! = 5{,}040$.

(The common number of bells used in ringing the changes is seven; a set termed a "peal." If all seven bells are rung through once in six seconds, then a complete set of changes—5,040 of them—requires 8 hours, 24 minutes. And ideally, it should be done without a mistake. Ringing the changes is a serious thing.)

Actually, the symbol "!" does not really mean "bell" (That was just an ingenious device of mine to introduce the matter.) In this case it stands for the word "factorial". Thus, 4! is "factorial four" and 7! is "factorial seven."

Such numbers represent not only the changes that can be rung in a set of bells, but the number of orders in which the cards can be found in a shuffled deck, the number of orders in which men can be seated at a table, and so on.

I have never seen any explanation for the term "factorial" but I can make what seems to me a reasonable stab at explaining it. Since the number $5{,}040 = 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$, it can be evenly divided by each number from 1 to 7 inclusive. In other words, each number from 1 to 7 is a factor of 5,040; why not, therefore, call 5,040 "factorial seven."

And we can make it general. All the integers from 1 to n are factors of $n!$. Why not call $n!$ "factorial n" therefore.

We can see, now, why the series used to determine e is such a good one to use.

The values of the factorial numbers increase at a tremendous rate, as is clear from the list of values up to merely 15!

0!	1
1!	1
2!	2
3!	6
4!	24

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5!	120
6!	720
7!	5,040
8!	40,320
9!	362,880
10!	3,628,800
11!	39,916,800
12!	479,001,600
13!	6,227,020,800
14!	87,178,921,200
15!	1,307,674,368,000

As the values of the factorials zoom upward, the value of fractions with successive factorials in the denominator must zoom downwards. By the time you reach $\frac{1}{6}!$, the value is only $\frac{1}{720}$, and by the time you reach 1/15!, the value is considerably less than a trillionth.

Each such factorial-denominatored fraction is larger than the remainder of the series all put together. Thus 1/15! is larger than 1/16! + 1/17! + 1/18! . . . and so on and so on forever, all put together. And this preponderance of a particular fraction over all later fractions combined increases as one goes along the series.

Therefore suppose we add up all the terms of the series through 1/14!. The value is short of the truth by 1/15! + 1/16! + 1/17! + 1/18! etc etc. We might, however, say the value is short of the truth by 1/15! because the remainder of the series is insignificant in sum compared to 1/15!. The value of 1/15! is less than a trillionth. It is, in other words, less than 0.000000000001, and the value of *e* you obtain by summing a little over a dozen fractions is correct to eleven decimal places.

Suppose we summed all the series up to 1/999! (by computer, of course). If we do that, we are 1/1000! short of the true answer. To find out how much that is, we must have some idea of the value of 1000!. We might determine that by calculating $1000 \times 999 \times 998$ . . . and so on, but don't try. It will take forever.

Fortunately, there exist formulas for calculating out large factorials (at least approximately) and there are tables which give the logarithms of these large factorials.

Thus, *log* $1000! = 2567.6046442$. This means that $1000! = 4.024 \times 10^{2567}$, or (approximately) a 4 followed by 2,567 zeroes. If the series for *e* is calculated out to 1/999!, the value will be short of the truth by only $1/(4 \times 10^{2567})$ and you will have *e* correct to 2,566 decimal places.

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(The best value of e I know of, was calculated out to no less than 60,000 decimal places.)

Let me digress once again to recall a time I had personal use for moderately large factorials. When I was in the army, I went through a period where three fellow-sufferers and myself played bridge day and night until one of the others broke up the thing by throwing down his hand and saying, "We've played so many games, the same hands are beginning to show up."

I was terribly thankful, for that gave me something to think about.

Each order of the cards in a bridge deck means a possible different set of bridge hands. Since there are 52 cards, the total number of arrangements is 52!. However, within any individual hand, the arrangement doesn't matter. A particular set of 13 cards received by a particular player is the same hand whatever its arrangement. The total number of arrangements of the thirteen cards of a hand is 13! and this is true for each of four hands. Therefore the total number of bridge hand combinations is equal to the total number of arrangements divided by the number of those arrangements that don't matter, or:

$$\frac{52!}{4 \times 13!}$$

I had no tables handy, so I worked it out the long way but that didn't bother me. It took up my time and, for my particular tastes, was much better than a game of bridge. I have lost the original figures long since, but now I can repeat the work with the help of tables.

The value of 52! is, approximately, 8.066×10^{67}. The value of 13! (as you can see in the table of factorials I gave above) is approximately 6.227×10^{9} and four times that value is 2.491×10^{10}. If we divide 8.066×10^{67} by 2.491×10^{10}, we find that the total number of different bridge games possible is roughly 3.238×10^{57} or 3,238,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or over three septendecillion.

I announced this to my friends. I said, "The chances are not likely that we are repeating games. We could play a trillion games a second for a hundred trillion trillion trillion years, without repeating a single game."

My reward was complete incredulity. The friend who had originally complained said, gently, "But, pal, there are only 52 cards, you know" and he led me to a quiet corner of the barracks and told me to sit and rest a while.

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Actually, the series used to determine the value of *e* is only a special example of a general case. It is possible to show that:

$e^x = x^0/0! + x^1/1! + x^2/2! + x^3/3! + x^4/4! + x^5/5! \ldots$

Since $x^0 = 1$, for any value of x, and 0! and 1! both equal 1, the series is usually said to start; $e^x = 1 + x + x^2/2! + x^3/3! \ldots$ but I prefer my version given above. It is more symmetrical and beautiful.

Now *e* itself can be expressed as e^1. In this case, the x of the general series becomes 1. Since 1 to any power equals 1, then x^2, x^3, x^4 and all the rest become 1 and the series becomes:

$e^1 = 1/0! + 1/1! + 1/2! + 1/3! + 1/4! + 1/5! \ldots$

which is just the series we've been working with earlier.

But now lets take up the reciprocal of *e;* or, in other words, $1/e$. It's value to fifteen decimal places is 0.367879441171442 . . . .

It so happens that $1/e$ can be written as e^{-1}, which means that in the general formula for e^x, we can substitute -1 for x.

When -1 is raised to a power, the answer is $+1$ if the power is an even one, and -1 if it is an odd one. In other words: $(-1)^0 = 1$, $(-1)^1 = -1$, $(-1)^2 = +1$; $(-1)^3 = -1$, $(-1)^4 = +1$ and so on forever.

If, in the general series, then, x is set equal to -1, we have:

$e^{-1} = (-1)^0/0! + (-1)^1/1! + (-1)^2/2! + (-1)^3/3! + (-1)^4/4! \ldots$

or $e^{-1} = 1/0! + (-1)/1! + 1/2! + (-1)/3! + 1/4! + (-1)/5! \ldots$

or $e^{-1} = 1/0! - 1/1! + 1/2! - 1/3! + 1/4! - 1/5! + 1/6! - 1/7! \ldots$

In other words, the series for $1/e$ is just like the series for *e* except that all the even terms are converted from additions to subtractions.

Furthermore, since 1/0! and 1/1! both equal 1, the first two terms in the series for $1/e$ - - - 1/0! — 1/1! - - - are equal to $1 - 1 = 0$. They may therefore be omitted and we may conclude that:

$e^{-1} = 1/2! - 1/3! + 1/4! - 1/5! + 1/6! - 1/7! + 1/8! - 1/9! + 1/10!$. and so on forever.

And now, at last, we come to my own personal discovery! As I looked at the series just given above for e— 1, I couldn't help thinking that the alternation between plus and minus is a flaw in its beauty. Could there not be any way in which it could be expressed with pluses only or with minuses only?

Since an expression such as $-1/3! + 1/4!$ can be converted into $-(1/3! - 1/4!)$, it seemed to me I could write the following series:

$e^{-1} = 1/2! - (1/3! - 1/4!) - (1/5! - 1/6!) - (1/7! - 1/8!) \ldots$

and so on.

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Now we have only minus signs, but we also have parentheses, which again offers an esthetic flaw.

So I considered the contents of the parentheses. The first one contains $1/3! - 1/4!$ which equals $1/(3 \times 2 \times 1) - 1/(4 \times 3 \times 3 \times 1)$. This is equal to $(4 - 1)/(4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1)$, or to $3/4!$ In the same way, $1/5! - 1/6! = 5/6!$; $1/7! - 1/8! = 7/8!$ and so on.

I was astonished and inexpressibly delighted for now I had the Asimov Series which goes:

$e^{-1} = 1/2! - 3/4! - 5/6! - 7/8! - 9/10! \ldots$ and so on forever.

I am certain that this series is at once obvious to any real mathematician and that it has been described in texts three hundred years ago—but I've never seen it and until someone stops me, I'm calling it the Asimov Series.

Not only does the Asimov Series contain only minus signs, but it contains all the digits in order. You simply can't ask for anything more beautiful than that.

Let's conclude now, by working out just a few terms of the series:

$$\begin{aligned} 1/2! &= 0.5 \\ 1/2! - 3/4! &= 0.375 \\ 1/2! - 3/4! - 5/6! &= 0.3681025 \ldots . \\ 1/2! - 3/4! - 5/6! - 7/8! &= 0.3679289 \ldots . \end{aligned}$$

As you see, by adding up only four terms of the series, I get an answer which is only 0.0005 greater than the truth, an error of 5 parts in a bit more than 36,000 or, roughly, $\frac{1}{70}$ of 1 percent.

So if you think the "Exclamation Point" of the title refers only to the factorial symbol, you are wrong. It applies even more so to my pleasure and astonishment with the Asimov Series.

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Here is a sparkling jet-age fantasy, in which a bit of Irish folklore finds its way to the Green Mountains of Vermont.

A MURKLE FOR JESSE

by Gary Jennings

"Children, leprechauns,
women beutifulle and yonge,
these be forrainers alle."
—Sir Eustace Peachtree

"ALL THE OTHER KIDS WENT UP," Jesse pouted. "Why can't I?"

"For two good reasons," said his mother. "Because I say you can't. And because, with that leg, you just plain couldn't."

Jesse glared balefully at the cast on his right leg. When it had been new and white, he had been the envy of every unbroken-legged boy in town. But the cast had been on now for a weary eternity, and was anything but white, and today it was Jesse's turn to envy his fellows.

"Durned old leg," he mumbled.

"Lan-guage," said his mother warningly. "And don't blame the leg. If you hadn't fallen out of that tree . . ."

"You can't have a tree-house anywhere else but in a tree," Jesse pointed out. "Mom, couldn't I try to go up the mountain?"

"No. Your father will tell you all about it when he comes down from there."

Jesse stumped around the kitchen, seething.

"Anyway, the other kids aren't going to see anything," Mrs. Farreway consoled. "They'll get spanked right back down again, out of the way. That airplane didn't crash just for you children to gawk at. It's a miracle that all those people weren't killed."

"I wouldn't get in the way," Jesse protested. "I just want to see the airplane pilot. I want to tell him that when I get to be a pilot, I'm gonna be a real sharp one, and not crash into any old mountains."

"He'd appreciate hearing that, right about now," his mother said drily. "Go and play outside, or there's going to be another crash right here."

Jesse limped forlornly through the house. From the front porch he gazed yearningly up at the mountain that loomed above the town.

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Last night, the familiar old hump had been a dazzling stranger, what with the National Guard searchlights and flares, and the faraway echoes of the rescue workers calling back and forth as they searched the wreckage of the big airliner. Today the mountain had resumed its usual air of broody aloofness, at least from where Jesse stood. There was nothing to be seen up there, not even a scar of mowed-down trees.

There wasn't much to be seen down here, either. The street was almost eerily empty. All the men of the town were still up on the mountainside, and all the women were indoors preparing hot food against their return. All the children, too—as soon as they could escape from the breakfast tables—had gone swarming for the trail that zigzagged up the mountain face. All but Jesse.

He blinked away tears of angry frustration, then decided to go around back and hate the tree-house. This blameless agent of his current quarantine was situated some hundred yards behind and out of sight of the house. It was a rickety accretion of packing crates, perched in the crotch of a sycamore. The tree stood beside a little creek that marked the rear boundary of the Farreway property.

For the first time since his accident, Jesse grumbled to himself, "Why couldn't I have fell in the water?"

Suddenly he noticed that someone apparently *had.* There was a little girl—no one he knew—splashing quietly in the shallows of the creek.

He edged closer to look her over, and decided that this was a very strange stranger indeed. She was little and she was a girl, but somehow "little girl" didn't exactly describe her. She was kneeling in the water, scooping up handsful of it and—as well as Jesse could make out—bathing her nose with it.

She caught sight of him and cheerfully waved a dripping hand, then sloshed out of the creek.

"Bathing my nose, I was," she announced, as she bent over to wring out the hem of her filmy frock.

"Your nose," Jesse parroted, stupefied.

"Trying to cool it off. Skinned it somethin' fierce. See?"

She did have a fiery red scrape right at the tip of her button nose. It was almost as red as her hair.

"Tore my lovely wing, too," she murmured mournfully. "Will ye look at that now?"

Jesse looked, and asked curiously, "What are you wearing them things for?"

"What are you wearing *that* for?" she countered, pointing.

"I busted my leg."

"Oh. Ah. I mistook it for a seven-league boot. I did wonder why you had only the one."

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"Say, I bet you got bunged up in the airplane crash," said Jesse, just now realizing it.

"Didn't I though," she said ruefully. "I'd seen less wear and tear if I'd come over the natural way, like, instid of relying on that uproarious monster."

"Mom said it was a murkle nobody got killed."

"Losh, I couldn't let that happen, could I now?" she said offhandedly. "Not with me amongst 'em."

Jesse pondered this, and asked tentatively, "Are you a murkle?"

She trilled a merry laugh. "Tell *that* to County Roscommon—and them that glad to be rid of me! But man dear, where is it I'm at now?"

"Here? This is Millborough, Vermont."

She frowned thoughtfully and muttered, *"Taim a' gol amu,"* then inquired, "Is it near the city of New York?"

"Gee, I don't think so. I'll go ask my—"

She stopped him with a gesture. "I'll not be moving on for a bit. Can't flounce in on New York sassiety with me nose peeled like it is, and these raggedy wings to me back."

"My Pop's been to New York," Jesse contributed helpfully.

"Has he now? And would he be knowing my dear brother—him that goes by the name of Seamus O'Cluricain?" Without waiting for an answer, she chattered blithely on. "He flew over just two years agone, and already it's the foreman he is in a shoe manufactory. The land of opporchunity, he wrote me, and I'm promised a fine position in the needle trades. 'Tis rich I'll be, before you can say sit-by-the-hob."

"That's swell," said Jesse.

The girl studied him, then stepped over to stand close by his side. They were exactly the same height. She asked warily, "Are all the men in America no bigger than this?"

"I'm not a man," said Jesse. "Yet."

"La, of course," she said, relieved. "It's me poor brain is addled by the commotion. For a trice I thought the riches wouldn't be worth it, having to settle for a wee little American husband."

"I'm only almost eight," said Jesse.

"Are you now?" Her green eyes twinkled. "Sure and you don't look a minute over seven years, five months and twelve days."

Jesse would have liked to sit down and do some calculations, but he had a queer suspicion that she was precisely right. Now her eyes sort of glowed at him, as she said musingly, "And ye'll top out at—um—eight spans and a third. Och, *very* good! Mayhap when I'm rich, and ye're grown . . ."

They were interrupted by a distant bonging sound.

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"That's the dinner bell," said Jesse. "Pop must be home."

"Dinner . . ." the girl said said wistfully.

"Well, lunch. Come on with me and—"

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "The big people mustn't see me. Not till I get to New York and my wings shrink away."

Jesse nodded; this was understandable. "I'll sneak you down some lunch," he promised, then turned back. "But where are you gonna stay while you're here?"

"Luck o' the Irish, I found me a wee house nobody's using." She pointed up.

"My tree-house," Jesse grinned. "Just don't fall out of it."

He found his father slumped wearily in a chair at the kitchen table, stroking his unshaven blue chin. Mrs. Farreway was at the stove, pouring steaming black coffee into a large mug.

"I tell you, Mildred, that's—"

"Hi, Pop!"

"—the durndest freak of an accident I ever heard of. There's not a piece of that plane left intact that a man couldn't pick up with one hand. By all the laws, every human being aboard should have been—" he groped for a word "—vaporized!"

"Pop, was it a murkle that saved 'em?"

"It sure must have been son."

Jesse nodded approvingly. "She's pretty durned good."

His father looked at him quizzically, then went on. "A couple of them got knocked out, a few more have minor fractures, bruises, contusions and what-not. But they hit that mountain at *three hundred* miles an hour!"

"Are they all foreigners, Vince?" his wife asked.

"And tourists. The plane came from Shannon. Refueled at Gander before it wound up here. That's another thing. The whole mountain absolutely reeks of gasoline. God only knows why it didn't—"

"Pop," said Jesse, as Mrs. Farreway set a platter of hot ham sandwiches on the table. "How big is eight spans and a third?"

Mr. Farreway looked blank for a moment, then scratched his head. "A span was an old-time measure of nine inches. What have you been reading? That's, let's see—seventy-two—seventy-five inches. Six feet and three inches, Jesse."

"Och, *very* good," said Jesse to himself.

His father stared again, then helped himself to a sandwich and took a hungry bite. "There is one casualty, Mil," he said between chews. "A little girl lost. Just Jesse's age."

"Oh, dear!" Mrs. Farreway exclaimed, and impulsively reached out a hand to touch her son's shoulder. "How did she die, when all the others—?"

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"Not dead. At least we hope not. Lost. Vanished. In all the confusion last night, no one noticed, but a stewardess remembered her this morning. The kid was traveling alone—on her way to visit grandparents in New York."

"What do you suppose happened to her?"

"Probably stunned or scared out of her wits, and she wandered off in the dark before the town woke up, or else she'd have made her way down toward the town lights. Instead she must have got round to the other slope of the mountain. The searchers are out now."

"Pray they'll find her," Mrs. Farreway said softly. "The poor dear must be terrified."

"No, she's not," said Jesse, from deep within his sandwich. "She just don't want the big people to see her."

This time both of his parents stared at him, and Mr. Farreway muttered to his wife, "Has he fallen off something again?"

"Jesse," said his mother. "What are you talking about?"

"Same thing you are. I seen—saw the little girl. Only I don't think she's really a little girl. Anyhow, she don't want to go to New York till her wings shrink."

Now Mr. and Mrs. Farreway looked at each other. "She could have suffered a bad concussion," the woman said. "Talking about wings and all."

"Young man, where did you see this little girl?"

"Maybe I better not tell. She don't want—"

The stern paternal voice: "Jesse."

"Okay, okay. She's down by the sycamore. But she's gonna be mad."

The adults exchanged glances again. "Won't hurt to have a look," said Mr. Farreway, cramming the last of his sandwich into his mouth. As they went out the kitchen door he was saying, "But I can't see how she could have got this far, this soon, unless she flew. A little kid, not knowing the trails . . ."

When they were gone, Jesse surveyed the table. The sandwich plate was empty, but half a loaf of bread remained. He put that into a paper bag, then opened the refrigerator and found the rest of the meat. It was a tinned Danish ham, and a good third of it still sat pink and pretty in the can. He put the whole thing, and a quart container of milk, into the bag with the bread.

When he heard the voices of his parents returning, he tip-limped out of the kitchen in the opposite direction. He went out the front door as Mrs. Farreway opened the back one, saying ". . . just disappointed at not getting to go, so now he's making up his own version of what happened . . ."

The girl's skinned nose was no

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redder than the rest of her pixie face when she blazed down at him from the tree-house, "Is it the paterollers in it, now? I had to lie doggo under the water till they left off poking about!"

"I tried to stop 'em," Jesse apologized.

The girl fluttered rather lopsidedly down to the ground, like a wounded moth. "Next time I'll put the *foidin seachrain* on 'em," she threatened. Then she looked into the bag that Jesse held out, cooed delightedly and said, "Faith and you're forgiven! There's enough here to choke the pooka himself!"

"I would've made a sandwich," said Jesse, "but I'm not allowed to play with knives."

The girl seemed not to mind the absence of niceties. Like a cub vixen, she attacked the meat with sharp, white little teeth.

"Mom and Pop came snooping," Jesse explained, "because they think you're too little to be out alone by yourself." When she made no comment, he ventured, "How old *are* you, anyway?"

"As you'd count it—oh, four hundred or so." She began to repack what little was left of the ham, bread and milk.

Jesse stared at her for a moment, then blurted, "You're older than Mom!"

"More'n likely," murmured the girl, with a distant smile.

"Durn!" said Jesse, crushed. "I can't never catch up."

"Sure and you can, maneen dear." She put her tiny hand on his. "Now that I'm going amongst people, and going into trade and all, I'll be giving up such triflin' advantages. What it amounts to—we'll be keeping pace from then on."

Jesse could only think to say, "Well, anyhow, Pop and Mom and everybody ain't gonna quit looking for the lost little girl—"

Abruptly she flared like a firecracker. "The lost little girl is it? Here I'm after forsaking immortality for a place among such as you, and you can only prate about some other female crayture!"

Jesse tried to explain, "The lost girl I meant is—"

"By the sod, I've not a jealous bone in me body!" she fussed. "But before I'll sit here and listen to mooning about some other colleen, I'll *swim* back to Ballaghadereen! Are you a ruddy English king, ye gossoon, that you can't make do with one woman at a time?"

Jesse squeaked, "I meant *you*," but she refused to hear.

"Man nor boy, America nor Roscommon, divil a bit of difference! Go on about your tom-catting, bucko. I'm off for me beauty nap."

Jesse tried to expostulate, but she took her sack of provender and fluttered pack up to the tree-house, where he could not follow. The tree-house continued to

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twitch and creak angrily for some time after she had vanished inside.

"Good gosh," Jesse mumbled wonderingly.

"Don't know why anybody'd *want* to find her," he growled, when he was out of earshot.

Prudence in the matter of the purloined ham dictated that he stay away from the house for a while. Thus the afternoon would have been a dreary one, if he hadn't discovered a fortuitously loose tooth in his lower jaw. Practicing a judicious system of unhurried twiddling, he was able to prolong the extraction process until the dinnerbell bonged again. Tooth in hand, Jesse started for the house; but an idea struck him.

He crept back to the sycamore, from which came not a sound. He found a discarded piece of the bread wrapper, folded the tooth into it, and stuck the little package to the tree trunk with a wad of antiquated chewing gum, right where she couldn't help seeing it. Then he stumped off to the house, rather glowing with magnanimous self-sacrifice. The glow lasted right up until the minute his mother confronted him.

"Have you been sneaking goodies to the Petersens' dog again, young man?" she demanded.

"Why no, Mom," he said, with the righteousness of unassailable innocence. "Remember, last time, you whaled the heck—"

She gestured impatiently. "Have you been feeding some old stray?"

"Gosh, no, Mom. I won't never forget that whaling—"

"Oh, never mind. Just so long as you've been behaving yourself. Go wash up for dinner." Jesse marched off, the epitome of filial obedience. As he toiled upstairs to the bathroom, he heard his mother saying, "Do you know, Vince, I must have bundled that ham up in the scraps I took out to the garbage. All this excitement . . ."

After dinner, Mr. Farreway called them out to the front porch. In the darkness the mountain was quite indiscernible from the equally black sky; like the sky, it had its own scattering of stars. But if you watched closely, these stars could be seen to move minutely here and there. They were the lanterns of the search parties, sleeplessly probing the tangles of forest and underbrush.

"Poor little babe in the woods," Mrs. Farreway said tearfully.

"Babe!" said Jesse under his breath. "Huh!"

"They'll have helicopters out if she isn't found by morning," said Mr. Farreway. "And her grandparents are on their way up."

"I feel so sorry for them," said Mrs. Farreway.

"So do I," her son said feelingly.

The next morning Jesse was diverted, on his way down to the

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tree-house, by the three Petersen children from across the street. They *had* climbed all the way up to the wreck yesterday, and now they were bursting to tell the stay-at-home all about it.

"Saw a p'peller tied up like a Scout knot!"

"Found me this rabbit's foot hangin' on the inst'ment panel!"

"Shoes all over the place!"

Jesse listened with the amused supercility of a connoisseur in such matters. The Petersens gradually became aware of his silent hauteur, and the excitement died out of their babble. Jesse switched them off entirely with the pronouncement, "*I* know where the lost little girl is." The three children stared at him, demolished. Their tales were all of yesterday; here was the man of the hour.

They might have glued themselves to him and forced him to take them along to meet the girl, but just then a clatter began in the air overhead and an odd shadow flailed along the sidewalk. "Here come the helicopters!" yelled the Petersens. They deserted the man of the hour and scampered off in a body, trying to stay in the shade of the churning blades.

"Humph," said Jesse, at the futility of children and helicopters alike; and he stumped on down through the back field to the sycamore.

His gift package appeared to have restored the girl's good humor. She giggled as she held out the tooth on her palm and said, "What in the ever-lovin' was this for?"

"Didn't you put it under your pillow?"

"Och, yes," she said with gentle sarcasm. "Just cast your eyes on all my fine silken pillows hereabout."

"Well, I'll bring you one tonight. What you do, see, you put the tooth under your pillow and in the morning there's a dime there."

"Is that a fact?" she said, sincerely interested. "And what's a dime?"

"Ten cents. Money."

"Ah-h," she breathed, and stared at the tooth, enthralled. "Well, would ye think it? Not even Biddy Early ever had such a trick."

Jesse pointed to the helicopters, three of them now, hovering around the crown of the mountain. "They're still looking—" he began, but the girl's green eyes snapped warningly. "—in the wrong place," he trailed off.

Rudely, the dinner-bell began to bong again, an urgent and commanding clangor this time.

"Your mither," the girl said spitefully, "must have been a blooming sexton in some other life."

"I'll be back," Jesse promised, and made off for the house as fast as he could limp.

He greeted his mother breezily,

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before he noticed the other people in the room, "Mom, you must've been a bloomer sextown in some other life! Oops. Hullo, Mr. Petersen."

Mr. Petersen, who was a trooper in the State Police, flicked an embarrassed glance at the speechless and scarlet Mrs. Farreway, cleared his throat and said, "Jesse, my sprats came and told me some mishmosh about you have a line on little Frederika."

"Frederika?" Jesse said huskily.

"The child who got lost from the airplane," Mr. Petersen said. "Frederika Anastasia Cabot."

"All *that?*"

The other man in the room, a stranger carrying a tremendous camera, said, "If you know anything about her, son, we'd sure like to hear it."

Jesse frowned in concentration.

"The waif's been lost for thirty-six hours now," Mr. Petersen prompted. "And she hasn't had a bite to eat in longer than that."

The camera man added, wheedlingly, "If you've found her, you'll get your picture in the paper. Maybe be on television, even."

Jesse suddenly shook his head. "I haven't found her." Neither of the men noticed the slight emphasis on the last word. They both looked at Mrs. Farreway.

"You can ask Mom," Jesse added. In some way he couldn't have explained, he was certain now that he *hadn't* found *her.*

Mrs. Farreway nodded unhappily. "I'm afraid Jesse was just—compensating—for not getting to visit the scene of the wreck."

"I hope you wouldn't mind, Mildred," said Mr. Petersen, "if I brought the grandparents around to meet Jesse, anyhow? They're all het up, you can understand, and any little semblance of hope . . ."

"But—false hope, Mr. Petersen?"

"Well, we're bound to find her." He coughed uncomfortably. "Sooner or later. And just talking to your boy—whatever kind of fantasy he spins for them—will keep the Cabots occupied, give 'em something to hold onto, better than moping around at the station."

"Of course. I understand. Bring them anytime."

Mrs. Farreway walked the men to the front door, while Jesse sidled toward the back. Mr. Petersen was still talking. ". . . been living in Athens since the end of the war. Married a Greek girl there. This would have been the first time his parents had seen the little girl . . ."

Jesse was safely over the rise from the house when he heard his mother calling, her voice freighted with jeopardy. Daringly, he paid no heed, and stumped along—toward the sycamore and a showdown—repeating to himself the name of the lost grandchild.

His quarry was idly braiding

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some blossoms of larkspur into a delicate chain. He planted himself in front of the girl, pointed at her as imperiously as an enchanter, and demanded, "Are you Frederika and a Space Ship Captain?"

"Glory," she said, and blinked. "Whatever is a Frederika and—?"

"That's the girl that got lost from the airplane."

"Do I look like a Frederika?" she said hotly. "Cushlamachree, do I *sound* like a Frederika?"

"You made me think you are!" said Jesse, just as angrily. With a flash of mature acuity, he accused, "You made all that fuss about the other girl just so I wouldn't know there *was* one."

She dropped her gaze. "And what is the silly spalpeen to me?"

"You can find her."

"Whisht! She has me to thank that she's still in one piece. Now if she's gossoon enough to get lost, she's no loss."

"We're both gonna get in trouble," Jesse predicted.

"Ye still don't appreciate the bird in hand!" she erupted. "Go along and moon after her yourself! Certes, I did not come all these weary miles to play the bloodhound."

"Well, okay, then," he growled, and stumped firmly away. So he did not see how she started to beckon, then checked the gesture and simply gazed after him, crestfallen.

Jesse had intended an air of deliberate finality in his departure, but actually he was at a loss to know what to do next. He skirted the fringes of his home property and crossed the street to where the Petersen children were at play. Naturally, he had to endure a nominal amount of yah-yah-ing about the "whopper" he had been caught in. But he managed to convince them that he had just been kidding all along, and was forgiven so far as to be asked to stay for lunch.

He played with the Petersen trio for the rest of the afternoon. He would have been content to lurk there until everything in general got back to normal. But his hideout was breached when Mr. Petersen came home unexpectedly.

"Ah, there you are," said he. "Hoof it home, Jesse. You've got company, and your mother's looking high and low."

Jesse hoofed it, but joylessly.

"You and I have things to discuss," Mrs. Farreway said to him at the front door, in a voice he knew well. "But right now, Mr. and Mrs. Cabot are waiting to talk to you. They're little Frederika's grandparents."

"I know."

"Then hear this, young man. You are not to tell them a single itty-bitty one of your fibs or stretchers or little white lies. I want you to tell them nothing but the plain, unvarnished truth. Do you understand?"

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"But Mom, what if they ask—" *"Do you understand?"*

With a sepulchral sigh, "Yes, Mom."

He found his father and the newspaper camera man also in the living room when he limped in. Both of the newcomers were whitehaired. Mrs. Cabot was all the time crying noisily into a soggy handkerchief, and Mr. Cabot was all the time patting and shushing her.

"So this fine young fellow is just the same age as our dear granddaughter," said Mr. Cabot.

"So young," said Mrs. Cabot. "Oh-woo-hoo-hoo."

"Easy, mother," said Mr. Cabot, patting her. "They tell me, son, you thought for a while you had seen a little girl like ours."

"Well," said Jesse uneasily, "prolly not like yours."

"But you did see a little girl, a stranger?"

The boy writhed, suffered and finally choked out, "Yes, sir."

"Jesse!" Mr. and Mrs. Farreway barked simultaneously.

"I did! You told me not to lie.

Mr. Cabot looked around perplexedly, as if suspecting a conspiracy. Mrs. Cabot rummaged in her purse and extended a snapshot. "Did she look like this, little boy?"

Jesse peered at it and said, "Gee, I dunno. This girl I seen—saw—well, her nose is all skinned up and . . ."

"Oh, her beautiful nose is ruined!"

"Steady, mother," said Mr. Cabot, patting her.

"Well, anyhow," said Jesse, still scrutinizing the photograph, "the girl I seen is older than her."

Mr. Cabot said, with a note of hope, "That picture was taken two years ago. She is older, now. Jesse, how old would you say *your* little girl is?"

"The way you'd count it," Jesse recited from memory, "four hundred or so."

The Cabots backed away from him with a gasp. The camera man chuckled. The Farreways looked ready to pounce.

"Well, that's what she said."

Mr. Cabot recovered slightly. "You *have* talked to her, then?"

"Yeah. She talks funny."

"Funny?"

"Sometimes she mumbles to herself in some funny languish."

Mr. Farreway interrupted, glowering at the boy. "Mr. Cabot, I really don't think you ought to take any of this too seriously."

"Oh, but don't you see?" said the old man eagerly. "Our granddaughter *would* talk funny. I mean differently. Greek is her second language."

"This is all Greek to me," muttered the camera man, who was now taking notes.

"This girl of yours," said Mr. Cabot to Jesse. "Could you bring her here?"

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"She won't come. See, she's hurt her wing—"

"Eee, her poor wing is broken!" wailed Mrs. Cabot.

"Mother, will you hush up! Our Frederika's wing . . . . Oh, for the love of Pete, what am I saying?"

"Jesse," said the boy's father in a frosty voice. "I think you'd better apologize to Mr. Cabot."

"But Pop, it's all true! The girl I seen is not the one they want."

Mr. Cabot said wretchedly, "Is it at all possible there were two small girls on that plane?"

"Not on the passenger manifest," said the camera man.

"But there was!" said Jesse. He tried desperately to explain from the beginning. "Mom, Pop, remember how you said it was a murkle that saved everybody from getting—"

Mr. Cabot interrupted. "Jesse, do you know where this girl of yours is right now?"

Jesse swallowed and looked sidelong at his father. "In my treehouse."

"In a *tree!*" bleated Mrs. Cabot.

"Don't distress yourselves," said Mr. Farreway grimly. "There's no one there, but we'll go down and look anyway, just to put your minds at ease."

Mr. Cabot helped Mrs. Cabot totter out through the kitchen, and the Farreways followed with flashlights. At the last moment, the camera man said, "Oh, what the heck," picked up his gear and went along. Jesse yelled after them as they disappeared, "Look under the water!" and heard Mrs. Cabot wail despairingly, "Oh-woo-hoo-hoo!"

Left alone, Jesse snuffled in self-pity. The girl was sure to elude them, and Pop was sure to come back with fire in his eye.

"Pst!" came a whisper from outside the living room window.

Jesse looked out at her. "You've fixed me good."

"You *are* in hot water, maneen dear. I heard the whole rigmarole. And I'm truly sorry, cross my heart. Come on and we'll set everything to rights."

"How?" Jesse asked suspiciously.

"How else? We'll fetch the brat for them."

It took Jesse a while to circle through the house, around the front and join her on the side lawn.

"Hurry it up," she urged. "They're on the way back and they're rampaging like O'Rory's bull. The old woman fell in the creek."

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can."

She stopped and looked down. "Och, that boot. You can't go climbing the mountain in that. Let's have it off." Before he could explain that it had to stay on for three more weeks, she knelt, did something, and it was off.

"Gee," said Jesse, hesitantly testing his weight on the liberated limb and finding it as good as new. "Thanks!"

"Now scurry. Scurry!"

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The girl apparently could see in the dark. She seized his hand and hauled him breathlessly along, avoiding the town streets to plunge through back yards, scramble over fences, duck clothes lines, and wake what sounded like a thousand watchdogs. Not until they were clear of the last habitations and on the mountain's first rising slope did she slacken the pace.

When he could speak without rasping, Jesse asked, "Do you know where Frederika is?"

"Sitting at the bottom of a clay pit that she can't climb out of. 'Tis all covered over with greenery, which is why the seekers did never see her." She added scornfully, "And the ninny is too proud to screech her lungs out, what any right-minded female would do."

The girl could probably have scaled the mountain in a tenth the time it finally took. The trails were inky black, and Jesse did not have her remarkable vision. Also, though the leg that had been broken was now as strong as ever, it had come out of the cast barefooted and vulnerable to briers, twigs and stones.

The first light of pre-dawn was in the sky by the time they reached their objective. When Jesse parted the screen of shrubbery and leaned over the edge of the clay pit, he could just make out the shape huddled at the bottom. The shape stood up and became a blonde little girl, somewhat wan and disheveled, but as poised as a princess when she greeted him, "So good of you to come."

"I'll go look for something to pull you out with," Jesse said. He meandered through the surrounding woods, but could find nothing until he came back to the pit. There was a fallen limb lying there that looked strong enough for Frederika to climb up, if it could be slid to the brink and leaned in. But it was too heavy for him to manage alone, and he had to wait a few minutes until his companion came fluttering back from some errand of her own.

"Very well, I'll lend a hand for the crayture," she said, when Jesse explained the maneuver. "But I'll be gone when she comes out."

"Gone!" Jesse echoed tragically.

"One woman at a time," she twitted him, then said seriously, "I've found an owl who knows the way to New York City. I'll go with him now, I'm that anxious to start me seamstressin' career in the needle trades." Jesse couldn't think what to say, but he felt suddenly desolate.

The two of them together were able to move the big limb forward by jerks until its far end overbalanced and slowly tilted down to the floor of the clay pit. Frederika began at once to struggle up it, amateurishly but doggedly.

The other girl waited with Jesse until Frederika's tousled platinum

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hair showed above the edge of the pit. Then she murmured, half to herself, "Aye, I'll *need* riches to compete."

She turned and gave Jesse a quick, hard hug. "Mind you remember me now, till ye're grown tall . . ." She pecked a cool kiss on his forehead and released him. Jesse blinked as the rising sun suddenly caught him full in the eyes; when he could see again, only Frederika was beside him.

They descended the mountain in that serene radiance that comes with certain dawns, as if the sun were shining through opals. Gallumphing downhill by daylight was a quick trip, and they arrived at the Farreway residence in short order—to find the whole household in a swivet.

Jesse's mother had found his cast-off cast and was upstairs having hysterics. Mrs. Cabot's weight of grief had apparently been dissolved through immersion; to be replaced by what she assured everybody was triple pneumonia. Now she was loudly telephoning her New York lawyers to sue the Farreways for letting her fall in the creek, and the camera man for taking a picture of it. The camera man was telling anyone who would listen that it was the only picture he'd taken during the entire disaster that was worth printing. Mr. Cabot and Mr. Farreway were breakfasting on cooking sherry in the kitchen and mulling plans to set up bachelor quarters together in the tree-house. Mr. Petersen and a couple of other troopers were trooping in and out, trying to make some sense of the night's goings-on.

Of course, the arrival of Jesse and Frederika calmed the troubled turmoil. There were feverish huggings and kissings, hosannahs and hallelujahs. Mr. Petersen hurried off to order all the town's bells, whistles and sirens sounded. The cameraman dashed about taking pictures and making excited phone calls. The Cabots nearly smothered both the children with affection and gratitude, while the Farreways plied them with a breakfast that Paul Bunyan couldn't have eaten. The lightning cure of Jesse's broken leg ("well, it was a murkle . . .") went almost unremarked in the general rejoicing, for which he was glad. Under protest, he submitted to having a picture taken with Frederika slavishly adoring him. The Cabots and Farreways chummily agreed that yes, darling Frederika *must* come to spend many a future summer in Vermont with her manly little rescuer.

Somehow, eventually, Jesse managed to slip away from the gushing bonhomie. He trudged unnoticed down to the sycamore and climbed up into the tree-house.

In one corner there lay an oblong parcel. It was the paper bag that had once contained provi-

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sions, now neatly stitched into a pillow shape and stuffed with dandelion fluff. When he picked it up he found a silver sixpence underneath.

Drowsily, he lay down with his head on the wee pillow. Just before he drifted off to sleep, Jesse told himself that mere Frederikas might come and go, but he was going to wait—right here if possible—for the promised return of a certain wealthy seamstress from New York City.

And who knows? Murkles do happen.

THE PTERODACTYL

Far pre-father of feathers, you are flying
Through cerebral Jurassics in a spasm
Of leathery vanes, afraid to sound the chasm
Where saurian trades of tooth and loin are plying.
Wing-fingered feeder on metaphysics, sig ning
From withering bowels denotes enthusiasm
Wasted chasing toothsome ectoplasm
And omens a skeleton decease while trying.

Sawbeaked epitome of bodiless
Idea, tossed by gusts of ether, dive
Through abstract mists and raid the sea of fact.
Eat rich strange fish, grow long bright feathers, press
Form's flesh around thought's rib, and so derive
From the act of beauty, beauty of the act.

—PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

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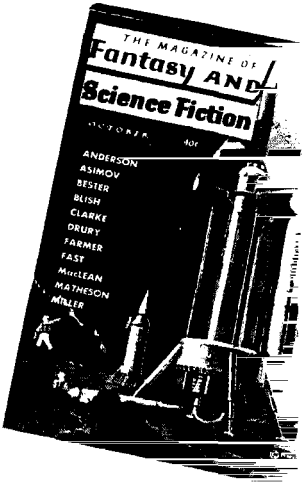

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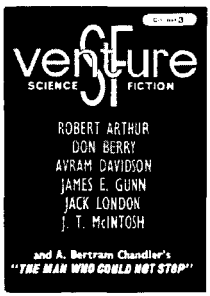

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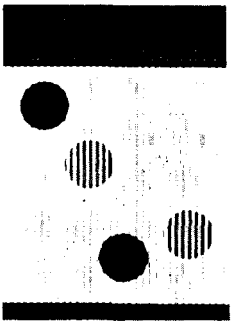

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